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Under A Texas Moon

OVER the great stone fireplace in the B Bar B living room there hang two gunbelts, one considerably shorter than the other, a small white felt sombrero with a bullet tear through the crown, and a tintype of a lovely, smiling girl with large dark-lashed eyes. It seems a curious choice of objects to adorn the most conspicuous space in the old living room. I had been visiting the B Bar B, off and on, for three years before I got the story—and even then I only got it third-hand.

A Texas moon can unseal lips. When my cousin and little Kitty Boyd came in from their ride down along the Rio that night, the soft light of the moon was still in their eyes. My cousin had his arm around her waist, and her raven-black hair pressed against his shoulder as she looked up at him. They didn't notice me, half asleep in a corner chair. But when they went over to the fireplace, stood there a minute looking at that strange mantle collection, and then he gathered her in his two arms and kissed her—I had a pretty good idea, first, that they were in love . . . and, second, that she had told him the secret of the draped gunbelts, the sombrero and the tintype. . . .

There had been moonlight on another Texas night, back in the days when the border country was the wild, roaring haunt of outlaws. It was easy in those days for a half dozen bandits to cut out a hundred cattle from a Texas herd, and run them across the river to a ready market where questions were never asked. And on that night back in the Sixties, there'd been a young hombre named Eddie Boyd riding with one of those outlaw bands.

The struggling little Hancock ranch was the rustlers' destination that night. It looked like an easy thing, for Old Man Hancock was sick, and he'd been so hard-pressed these last couple years that he had no crew to help him watch his stock. But they didn't reckon with the slim eighteen-year-old girl in the white sombrero who was singing softly to herself as she rode the short circle around the herd.

Two of the outlaws rode down the slope toward the rider they saw circling the herd. One of these two was Eddie Boyd. The other three worked their way around to the far side, to stampede the

cattle toward the river when the gunfire brought them awake.

The first that Barbara Hancock knew of trouble was a command to toss up her hands. She didn't. She flipped sideways in the saddle as she spun her horse and went for her belted gun. And a bullet slapped her pretty white sombrero back off her head, hanging by the chin thong across her shoulders. She fired her own gun then, and the man who had shot at her clutched his side.

He was out of the raid, and the second man, not ten feet from the spunky, blazing-eyed ranch girl, was out of the raid, too. All he said at the time was, "Hellity-damn, he's a she!" and he lowered his gun. That was Eddie Boyd, who had wanted excitement in his life—and had found it.

Suddenly those two were fighting side by side. There's no time for explanations when three gun-wild desperadoes are stampeding your herd. But the girl must have seen something in the admiring grin of the tall young buckaroo that told her she had to trust him. And the buckaroo must have known doggone well that his outlaw days were over, that a girl's flashing eyes in the light of a Texas moon had called him back from the hell-trails.

They won their fight, together. They saved the herd, and sent four wounded outlaws back across the river on the run. After that, came the explanations, as a shaken, sobbing girl found comfort and security in the arms of the man who had come to her from across the river. And when the Rio moon crept down beyond the western horizon, Eddie Boyd knew the choice he had made, in that first mad crash of gunfire, was the choice he would keep. . . .

Which explains, in a way, what my cousin said when he and Kitty Boyd stood there by the fireplace, in each other's arms: "Even if your grandfather was still an outlaw, darling, even if all your kinfolks were locked up in jail, do you think it would make difference?"

"I—I don't think it would," said Kitty, and lifted her lips again to his—as the old-fashioned tintype smiled down at them, amid its frame of mementos from a glorious past . . . mementos of a brave and ageless love.

THE EDITOR.

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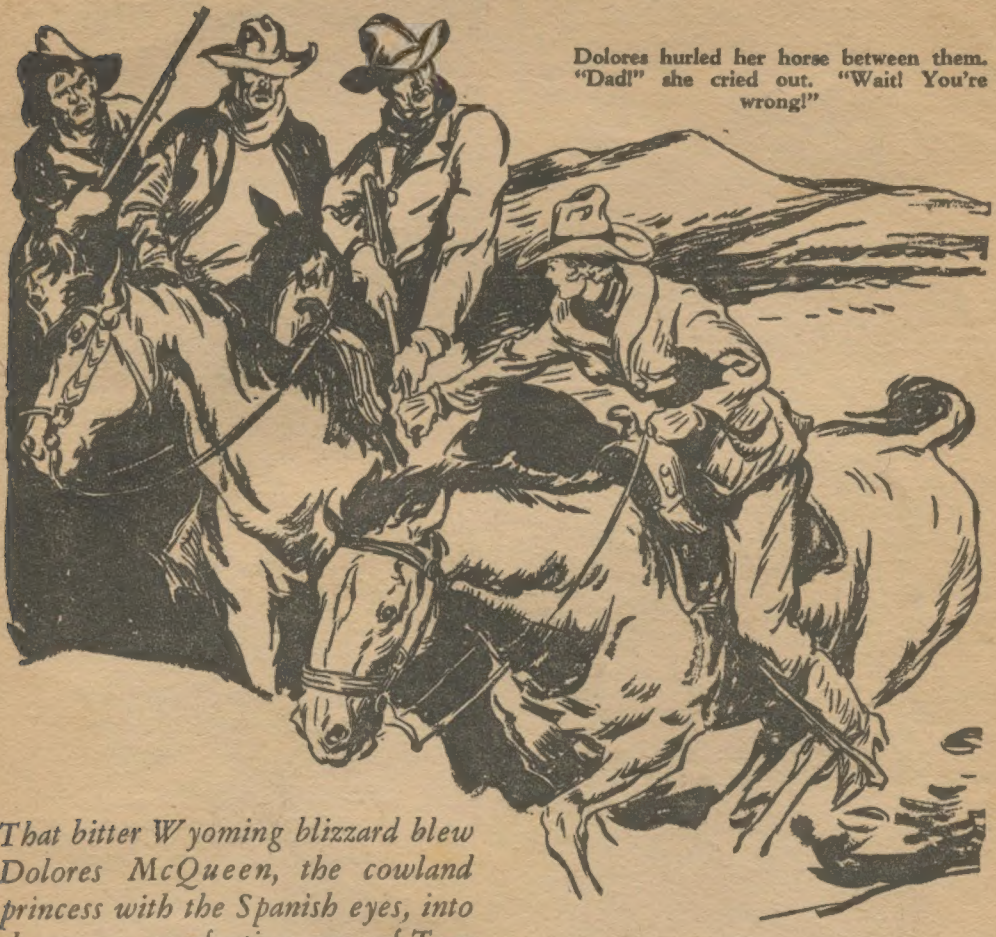
Sweetheart of Stormy

By Cliff Farrell



Dolores hurled her horse between them. "Dad!" she cried out. "Wait! You're wrong!"

That bitter Wyoming blizzard blew Dolores McQueen, the cowland princess with the Spanish eyes, into the strong, comforting arms of Tom Caswell, leader of the small-ranch Pool that was sworn to ruin her father. . . . She found shelter in his snow-locked cabin, and rebellious ecstasy in his sweet embrace—but both must end forever with the passing of the storm!

CHAPTER ONE

Romeo of Stormy Range

THE GIRL who alighted from the northbound stage at Needle Rock had a dashing, striking beauty. Her hair, under a saucy little fur turban, was as rich and luminous as spun gold, making a vivid contrast with her almond-shaped Spanish eyes.

She flinched as the bitter wind whipped her skirts against her shapely figure and cut through her trim, fox jacket. Looking at Needle Rock, she saw twin rows of log and frame buildings, half-buried in the snow. Beyond the little cowtown, rose the winter-bound ridges of Thunder River range, clothed on their lower slopes in a narrow, shaggy blanket of evergreen timber.

The stage rolled away with a crunch of wheels in the frozen ruts. A sudden

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doubt struck Dolores McQueen. Texas-born, Texas-bred, Texas-loyal, she had never seen a land mailed to the teeth in ice and snow. The bite of the wind was like the clawing touch of a sensuous enemy on her smooth cheeks.

She looked helplessly at her baggage, which the stage driver had tossed over the snowbanks to the sidewalk path. Down in her home range, on the temperate Frio River, half a dozen eager men already would have been vying to help her. As the daughter of the famous Bat McQueen, owner of the big Curly Q brand, she had never lacked masculine attention.

She felt lonely and lost here in Needle Rock. She regretted now that she had not sent word ahead to her father and brother that she was coming. They were up here

establishing a new northern ranch for the Curly Q. They had trailed ten thousand head of stock north the previous summer, to take advantage of this new range recently thrown open to grazing.

It had been an impulsive whim that had brought her from the comfort of the big ranch in the gentler climate to surprise her kin here in Wyoming. Now she suddenly felt a throat-tightening yearning for the sight of her rugged, indulgent father and her stalwart, black-haired brother, Dave. It seemed to Dolores McQueen that this northern country was hostile to herself and her kind.

The cold stung tears from her eyes, blinding her, as she struck out across the road toward a hotel sign which creaked dismally in the wind. The graceful high heels on her Spanish slippers had never been intended for battling the wintry mantle of a Wyoming trail. She found herself floundering helplessly to her knees in snow.

Firm arms plucked her bodily from the drift, and carried her lightly to the opposite sidewalk. She looked, startled, into smoky-blue eyes, puckered at the corners. A funnel-brimmed range hat slanted above straight, dark brows. His lean, weather-burned jaw reminded her of her brother Dave. His features were too ruggedly chiseled to be called handsome. It was the face of a strong, wilful man, a man who had seen his share of gruelling saddle work, of smoking branding fires, and of dusty trail herds.

He lifted his hat, and glanced at her slippers with a slow grin. "They're neat, miss, but not practical in three feet of frozen rain. Better get yourself shod for winter."

Dolores straightened her turban, and said, "Thank you."

She felt a warm tide rising in her cheeks as she turned away. She had seen the patent appreciation of her beauty that leaped into his eyes. She was remembering his clean, hard strength, as she walked on toward the weathered hotel.

AS SHE reached the plank steps of the hostelry, two riders spurred into town. They swung down at a saloon rail adjoining. Dolores paused, a delighted smile kindling, as she read the shoulder brands on the cowponies. The Curly Q! That brand was like the sight of a friendly face in an alien land. The Curly Q was the famous McQueen iron—*her* brand!

Her smile faded as she took notice of the two riders. They were unkempt, unshaven. One emptied a whiskey bottle, and smashed it against a post. They swaggered to the sidewalk, and the big, black-jowled one shouldered aside an elderly, inoffensive townsman who was passing, sending him sprawling into a snowbank.

They turned toward the saloon door, chuckling. Noticing Dolores, they stopped and stared with crass insolence. The short, underslung puncher passed a twisted, leering remark to his companion that brought a hot, angry flush to Dolores's face.

She swung about hastily, to enter the hotel. She discovered now that the lank cowboy who had toted her across the street was standing behind her, carrying her two suitcases. She had a glimpse of the cold anger in his eyes as he set the suitcases down. With a casual, long-legged stride, he overtook the swaggering pair as they reached the storm door of the saloon.

His studied deliberation fascinated Dolores. She watched him jerk the smaller man around, and knock him down with a smash to the jaw.

The bigger puncher whirled, startled. "Damn yuh, Caswell," he blurted—and dug frantically for his hip gun.

The lank cowboy still did not seem to hurry. Yet he reached the man before the gun was lifted. He struck again, a

punch that carried shocking power. He drove a second blow home, and his victim fell through the swinging doors with a crash.

Moving in that same lazy manner, he dragged his victims one by one across the sidewalk, hoisted them shoulder high, and plunged them head-down in a deep snowdrift.

A little, hard smile curved his lips as he came back, straightening his heavy saddle coat. He picked up the suitcases, grinned apologetically at Dolores.

"In behalf of the decent folks in this range, miss, I'm apologizing for those two wart-hogs," he remarked. "You'll find culls in every herd. Don't hold it against the country in general."

Dolores looked at the Curly Q brands on the horses, and swallowed hard. Her glance traveled up and down the street, collecting ominous impressions. A blacksmith had stepped to the gloomy door of his shop across the street, a cooling mule-shoe tonged in his fist. He stared with heavy, foreboding silence at the dazed Curly Q hands, who were clawing out of the snowdrift. Farther along, more stony-faced men had appeared—mostly cowmen. All of them watched with brooding calm.

Shaken, Dolores followed the lank man into the uncarpeted hotel office. Half a dozen cowmen came hurrying in, and a chorus of congratulations arose.

"Good work, Caswell!" a sinewy cattleman boomed, and slapped her champion on the back. "Bat McQueen might shake the earth down in Texas, but he'll learn that he can't tromp on honest folks up here on Thunder River. We're behind you to the last chip."

"You ought to have used a gun on 'em, Tom," another growled. "Them McQueen snakes ain't fit to soil your knuckles on."

McQueen! Dolores's heart missed a beat. Appalled, she read the bitterness in these men's faces at the mention of that name. They hardly even glanced at her. Above everything else, that proved that this town of Needle Rock was set on a hair trigger. Men were not in the habit of ignoring the comely Dolores McQueen.

Tom Caswell, however, had not forgotten her. He set her luggage down; and stood, hat in hand, his lean face smiling remotely. "If there's anything else I can do miss, name it," he said hopefully.

"Nothing," she murmured. "And thank you."

She was quivering inside. Nervously she stripped off her gloves. She saw Tom Caswell's cool glance seek out the third finger on her left hand, which bore no ring. She had a sudden panicky sensation when she comprehended the meaning of the flame that leaped in his eyes. He looked at her, and she was startled by the deep-rooted purpose that came in his mind, as plainly as though he had spoken it aloud.

She turned away, flustered. The clerk spun a dog-eared register. Her hand shook as she took the pen. She hesitated, then wrote the first name that popped into her head. The name she signed was Dolores Mason, Fort Smith, Arkansas.

She felt disloyal to her father as she set down that name, but she could not bring herself to reveal her true identity, with Tom Caswell standing there at her shoulder.

DOLORES was glad to escape to the room that Ink Speers, the clerk, unlocked. Ink Speers was a thin, bald man who wore a celluloid collar, and kept a red pen holder perched on a big ear.

"You got folks in these parts, Miss Mason?" he asked, with western friendliness.

Dolores thought fast. She had familiarized herself with a map of the Thunder River country which the Texas crew had brought back to her at the home ranch after trailing the stock herds north

in the summer. She remembered a nearby settlement.

"I—I have friends at Chalk Rock," she answered. "Is it far?"

"'Leven miles west. But you'll have to go saddleback. Ain't been a stage or buggy over the Chalk Rock trail since the last fall of snow, but foot animals kin git through."

"That suits me," Dolores smiled. "Can I rent a livery horse? I'll start as soon as I change to riding togs."

Ink Speers looked dubious. "Might be better to hold off a day or two, miss. There's weather brewin'. Looks like snow—maybe a real blizzard."

He relented as he saw her disappointment. "I reckon you could make it easy, long before dark. It ain't far, an' the trail is easy. Anyway, there's two or three ranches along the way where you can hole up if it sets in to snow. I'll have a horse waitin'."

Dolores knew that the new Curly Q ranch was about twenty miles south of Needle Rock. The map showed a main trail passing within a mile of the pencil mark the cowboys had made to indicate the headquarters spread. The hour was barely past noon. She had no doubt that she could ride it before dark.

She thanked Ink Speers. After he left, she opened her bags, and changed to a heavy woolen saddle skirt. She drew on a second pair of stockings, donned a sweater, and slid into a heavy fleece-lined, canvas-faced storm coat. She wrapped a scarf around her head, under a green tam o' shanter.

Last of all, she dropped a short-muzzled .38 into the pocket of her wind-breaker.

She glanced out the window at the colorless sky, and shivered as she saw wraiths of snow dancing down the street on the wind. She sighted the two Curly Q punchers, whom Tom Caswell had chastened, riding sullenly out of town on the south trail.

Pocketing the map, she descended to the office. She told Ink Speers she would send for her luggage later. She glanced around guiltily for Tom Caswell, but he was not in the office.

A livery hostler had a horse waiting at the rail. He warned her of the threat of a blizzard, and told her where she could find shelter along the Chalk Rock trail.

Looking back as she rode down the street, she saw Tom Caswell throwing a hitch over a pack horse in front of the mercantile store. He paused, watching her depart, and she fancied that disappointment showed in his attitude. Somehow, that brought a little pleased smile to her lips.

CHAPTER TWO

Blizzard Castaway

DOLORES took the west trail until she was out of sight of town, then swung across country through deep snow to the south trail. This, according to the map, would take her near the Curly Q.

The memory of Tom Caswell's dejection lingered in her mind. But a dull apprehension began to grow as she thought it all over. Trouble was brewing in this frozen Wyoming range. The McQueens seemed to be hated and feared—and from what she had gathered in the hotel office, the lank, forceful Tom Caswell was looked upon as the leader of the opposition.

The single-track trail, that riders had broken in the heavy snow, veered into the timbered hills. She urged the horse faster, suddenly doubly anxious to reach the Curly Q. Somewhere there was a terrible misunderstanding. Her father was not in the habit of hiring slovenly, gun-packing ruffians of the type who had insulted her in Needle Rock. Down in Texas, Bat McQueen had a reputation as a two-fisted, square-dealing cowman who

picked his men with the same care he used in selecting breeding stock.

It frightened her to think of Tom Caswell opposing her father and brother. She had seen vividly Caswell's capacity for swift, decisive violence. She was fully aware of that same trait in the McQueen men. The possibility of conflict between them appalled her.

She aroused suddenly to discover that the trail ahead forked. All around lay an untracked maze of hills, buried in the silence of winter. With cold-stiff fingers, she opened the map. It showed no such fork. She sat there frowning a moment, then decided to chance the left branch, which seemed to swing in the general direction of the Curly Q.

There had been less travel over this route. The horse slowed, setting its hoofs in the crusted tracks made by previous riders. The cold was increasing, and so was the wind. Dolores beat her gauntleted hands to restore circulation. At times she dismounted and floundered ahead on foot, leading the horse, to drive the biting chill from her toes.

The wind came harder, striking in savage gusts that took her breath away. She could hear it howling in the timber. She swallowed hard as she realized how swiftly the day was waning. It seemed to her that she had already traveled more than twenty miles.

She urged the tiring horse faster. A cold, gritty particle stung her cheek. It was beginning to snow. And these were not the tame, wet flakes she had seen once or twice down in south Texas. This snow cut like a sand-blast.

Then she came to another unmapped fork in the trail. Here the hoof tracks seemed to branch in several directions.

Real fear tightened her throat. She had seen no human habitation since leaving Needle Rock. She looked back, startled to discover her backtrail swept by a howling, swirling smother of snow. She frantically crowded her animal ahead again. With a prayer on her lips, she chose at random one of the trails that branched out ahead.

The snow came in a flood now, blinding her. The storm was hastening the approach of twilight. Dolores, with howling darkness setting in, knew that her life was now at stake. Numbness was creeping from her arms and legs up into her body.

The route she followed was beginning to disappear under the new blanket of snow. She was in the saddle, snow-caked, feeling the heavy apathy that marks the beginning of the end, when the horse stopped. Vaguely, in the last, dim light of the howling day she saw the tracery of corral bars. Looming beyond, was the bulk of a building.

A RANCH! A reprieve from death! She dropped from the saddle, and struggled to a log-built barn, deep in snowdrifts. She caught a glimpse of a ranchhouse beyond the corral. No lights showed there, but it meant shelter, perhaps a fire and food. It meant life to her.

She tied the horse in the barn, and fought her way to the square, little ranch cabin. The door opened at her touch on the latch. She stepped into the chill darkness of a small living room. She made out solid, homemade tables and benches and two wall bunks. There was a rock fireplace to the left. Beyond, a door stood open into a kitchen.

She guessed that this was the abode of some lone cowman, for there was no sign of a woman's hand about the place. She went into the kitchen and saw a cast-iron cookstove. Wood was piled high in the corner. She heaped shavings and pitch-pine in the firebox, and was reaching for the match case on the wall, when she paused, listening.

The front door banged open. Boots stamped into the living room.

A heavy voice sounded above the howl of the storm: "Smooth down them footprints on the doorsill, Ed. Caswell might spot 'em, an' know he had visitors."

"Maybe he won't show up tonight," another thick voice said.

"He was loadin' his grub pack when we left town, wasn't he?" the first speaker snapped impatiently. "He'll show up here—an' it won't be a long watch, neither."

Dolores stood motionless, without breathing. She recognized one of those hoarse voices. It was that of the bigger of the two punchers whom Tom Caswell had slugged in town.

They walked heavily toward the kitchen. Instinctively, Dolores moved to the far side of the cookstove and crouched behind it, huddling there on her knees, holding her breath. The kitchen was almost dark now. She barely made out the shadows of the two men as they tramped in.

"I'm damned near froze," one of them said, and kicked savagely at a bench against which he had stumbled. "A fire would sure hit the spot with me."

"Caswell might smell the smoke an' git suspicious," the other pointed out. "That rannie is gun-handy, you hear me. I ain't takin' no chances with him. We better lay low awhile. It's almost dark. If he's goin' to show up atall, it'll be mighty soon."

"It'll be worth waitin' for," the first speaker agreed. "Damn him, I want him to die slow an' hard fer what he done to us in town today."

"Shu—uh. Listen!"

They stood motionless, straining their ears. Dolores now plainly heard the creak of saddle leather and the slog of hoofs between gusts of wind. The sounds passed close by the house.

"That's him," one of them breathed tensely. "He's gone on to the shed to put up his horses. Git ready."

They crept back to the living room. Dolores's mouth was dry, and her tongue seemed to fill it suffocatingly. She knew now that the storm had brought her to Tom Caswell's little ranchhouse. These two had come for another purpose. They meant to ambush and murder Caswell. The fact that they were her father's Curly Q punchers burned in her mind like damning acid.

She realized her own predicament now. Trapped in this stormbound cabin, an eyewitness to their crime, she could picture her own fate at the hands of these callous killers.

She thought of her gun then. Her numbed fingers ached as she drew it from the pocket of her wind-breaker, but the weight of the bulldog-muzzled .38 heartened her.

She plainly heard the grating of boots in the dry snow at the front door. The storm roared louder, and an icy draught swirled through the cabin, as the door opened.

IT SEEMED to Dolores that her thudding heart must sound even louder than the pounding of the storm in this dark cabin. Through that uproar in her ears, she heard the click of high-heeled boots moving across the puncheon floor of the living room.

A match flared feebly, and a kerosene wick took hold. Tom Caswell's square-shouldered shadow danced against a wall that was visible to her through the doorway.

A harsh, jeering voice spoke. "Howdy Caswell."

Caswell's shadow stopped, and she saw the way he turned slowly to face them. The two killers moved out into plain view of Dolores. They had cocked guns in their hands, and she saw the gray ferocity in their faces.

Tom Caswell's voice was cool and scornful. "Well, well! The blizzard has

sent even the coyotes to cover. Ed Barker, and Idaho Slim, in person. What's on your mind?"

The big man, Ed Barker, showed his crooked teeth in a cheerless grin. "I reckon you can guess why we're here, Caswell. In the spring some line-rider likely will come across a skeleton about your size, layin' in some coulee."

"So Bat McQueen has stooped to this to get me out of the way," Caswell said bitterly.

"This is our own idea, yuh fool," Barker spat. "But I reckon McQueen will raise our pay if he hears about it."

"There'll be others to take my place," Caswell responded grimly. "Murdering me won't save Bat McQueen, nor will it make things easier for vermin like you two. McQueen, and all the things he represents, are going to be stamped out of this range."

Ed Barker chuckled mirthlessly. "Say your prayers, mister. I'm puttin' a slug in your belly first, an' as you lay there squirmin' I'll kick your face in."

Dolores saw Barker's scabby fist tighten on his gun. He meant to fire.

She took deliberate aim, and squeezed the trigger. The shot sent a red flash through the cabin. Barker's gun arm jerked violently, and the six-shooter went skittering from his grasp. It exploded as it hit the floor.

Barker reeled back with a sick groan. The bullet had smashed his arm at the wrist. The stocky, underslung Idaho Slim whirled to face the kitchen door, and his crooked features were contorted in a grimace of consternation.

That was all the time Tom Caswell needed to get at his own .45, which lay holstered under his saddle coat. Idaho Slim realized his error, and spun again to face Caswell. He veered his gun, and fired frantically—but a flash too late.

The double roar of six-shooters rocked the shack. Idaho Slim went spinning back against a wall. He folded at the waist as a crimson spurt poured from his chest. He fell on his side, and lay quiet.

Dolores, walking like an animated doll, moved stiffly into the room. She was as pale as death. She saw the mighty surprise leap into Tom Caswell's taut face as he recognized her.

"I—I . . ." she began.

She was swaying. He lifted her in his arms, and once again she was keenly aware of his hard, complete strength. She tried to explain, but the words would not come. She clung to him, trembling, and his arms tightened, cuddling her and comforting her with low, husky words as he would a child.

He at last carried her to a bunk, and left her sitting there. Vaguely, she saw him jerk the groaning Ed Barker to his feet, tie a tourniquet above the man's bullet-broken wrist.

"I ought to kill you, Barker," she heard him say stonily. "But nobody but Bat McQueen's outfit could shoot a wounded man. I'm sendin' you back to McQueen along with your dead partner. Fetch up your horses. It's only five miles to the Curly Q. If you don't make it in this storm, that's your bad luck. Thank your stars I'm givin' you even that much of a chance. If you get there alive, tell Bat McQueen that I'm killin' any damned Curly Q rider I find this side of Badger Crick from now on."

Dolores fainted then. She had a vague recollection afterwards of Caswell gently removing her outer clothes and putting her to bed in heated blankets. She tried to push him away, babbling hysterically.

She drank the steaming whiskey toddy, flavored with lemon extract, that he put to her lips. Her exhausted body and overwrought nerves relaxed then, and she dropped asleep. Her head was pillowed on Tom Caswell's arm, her golden hair flowing over the head of the bunk almost to the floor.

"Don't—don't leave me," she murmured as her eyes closed.

CHAPTER THREE

The Trail Out—From Paradise

DOLORES awakened with the tumult of the blizzard in her ears. It was morning. Snowdrifts were piled against the windows on the weather side, but as she lay there in the bunk she had a drowsy sensation of warmth and security.

Then she remembered what had happened. She sat up with a little cry. Caswell came striding in from the kitchen, where coffee and sizzling smoke-side lifted a compelling aroma. His dark hair was an unruly mass. In his woolen shirt, with the sleeves rolled up and the collar open on his tanned throat, he looked taller and straighter than ever.

He had cleaned up all signs of the gunfight.

"Coffee's boiling, an' the spuds an' flitch are brownin' up," he reported. "Come an' get it or I'll feed it to the jaybirds."

"I—I took the wrong trail yesterday, and wound up here," she volunteered shakily. I had just got in the house when they—they came. I—"

"You saved my life," he interrupted gently. "It was the gamest thing I've ever seen."

She started to push back the blankets, then went rosy as she realized that she was scantily clad. Hastily she drew the covers up to her chin, looking at him from under drooping lashes.

"According to what you said, they worked for someone named Bat McQueen," she remarked, trying to appear merely curious. "I also heard the name of McQueen mentioned in Needle Rock yesterday. This range seems to hate him. Why is that?"

He shrugged. "Bat McQueen is a Texan. Maybe you've heard of the Curly Q outfit down on the Frio River in Texas. Last summer McQueen drove ten thousand head into this range, which had just been sold off by the Indian Commission. A dozen small brand owners like myself were on the ground first, and had our grass staked out. There was trouble right at the start over line surveys. After that McQueen accused us of rustlin' from him.

"One thing led to another. He began hiring tough hands, an' sent his old crew back to Texas. He carries nothin' but men like the two you saw last night. His gunmen keep crowding us, in the hope of stirrin' up trouble. There's been fist fights, an' some gun play. McQueen has branded all us small owners as cow thieves. That's only a trick, of course. His real aim is to tar us so black that he'll look lily white in comparison when he moves in to grab our grass."

Fierce protest burned in Dolores. She wanted to defend her father. He watched the color drain from her face, and snapped his fingers in self-reproach.

"Here I stand, wastin' time, while you sit there, weak an' half-starved," he said. "I'll have the grub on the table by the time you're dressed."

He went into the kitchen and closed the door. Dolores dressed slowly, a deep shadow in her heart. Somewhere a terrible mistake must have been made. She could not bear to think of Tom Caswell as her father's bitter enemy.

She arranged her hair as best she could, pinched color back into her cheeks, and went into the kitchen. He looked up from the stove with a grin of greeting. His expression changed into something that aroused tumult within her. He stood looking at her and then came closer.

"Are you promised to any man?" he asked abruptly, and seemed to steel himself to face a blow.

With any other man she would have

parried such a question with artful coquetry. But now her answer came with a bluntness that equalled his own.

"No!"

He came a step nearer, and took her hand, looking down at it as though it were a rare jewel. "If I live . . ." he began, and there was a shining longing in his eyes.

He did not finish it, but it never occurred to Dolores that there was anything more to say. She understood. Here was a man, above all others, who meant to win her. And suddenly she was not at all certain that she could resist him, no matter what the circumstances.

Her heart chilled as his uncompleted promise echoed. If he lived? And her own father was the man who might kill him!

Her eyes dropped. A shadow, bleak and foreboding, came into her mind.

THE BLIZZARD lashed the mountains with untiring savagery throughout the day. But the cabin was weather-tight and homey. Dolores found herself humming gaily as she prepared the noon meal. The apprehension of the morning had receded from her thoughts. Surely, she assured herself, she could bring Tom Caswell and her father together, and clear up this impossible misunderstanding.

This Tom Caswell, who had fought two men, and who had killed one of them with the ruthless impersonality of a lightning flash, was a constant revelation to her. They found much to talk about, here together in the stormbound cabin. Caswell spoke of his ranch, and his ambitions. His dry, easy humor delighted her. The flame that burned deep in him whenever he looked her way, brought an increasing thrill.

Dolores slept dreamlessly in the bunk through another night of howling storm, while Caswell slept in the kitchen. The blizzard was still raging when they breakfasted again, and it continued through a second day.

Dolores sat in the ruddy glow of the fireplace after the evening meal, her feet curled under her. Tom stood against the mantel, his pipe in his hand. A reflective silence held them both.

He came suddenly to tower over her. "I love you," he said, as though it had been wrenched from him. "I guess I fell in love with you the day I carried you across the street in Needle Rock. You were so different, so beautiful. You're wonderful. You can't be real. You're only a dream. When this storm lifts, you'll vanish along with it."

Her heart was pounding. He bent near, the longing vast and compelling in his face. She reached up, and touched his lips with her fingers.

"I'm real, Tom," she said softly. "I'll never vanish."

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She arose, and stood before him, looking up at him.

"I—I wish it would last forever," she burst out. "This storm—it's been so wonderful!"

"Wonderful? You think that, too?" His tone had an awed wonder. He took her hands. "Then it has meant something to you? You *do* care?"

He drew her into his arms. "Tell me," he pleaded. "You do love me. You'll marry—"

"Don't say it now, Tom," she cried out, and fought the longing to surrender in his arms. "But I want you to ask me that again—some day."

"Now!" he insisted. "You love me, don't you?"

"Please," she almost moaned. "There's something else—something about me that you don't know."

"Nothing can ever change love," he told her.

She looked at him, her eyes swimming. "Do you promise that?" she demanded tensely.

He nodded, a puzzlement showing in his eyes. "Nothing will ever change me," he said slowly, as though making a vow. "And I know nothing will ever change you, Dolores."

A shining joy lighted her oval face. "No," she breathed. "Nothing will ever change me either, Tom. Nothing will ever come between us. I love you, I do. I love you so much."

She lifted on her toes and kissed him on the mouth. He drew her close, telling her huskily how much he adored her, how much he wanted her as his wife. And she responded to his ardor, happier than she had ever been in her life.

Later, after she had crept into her bunk, the black doubts came back with redoubled force. Her sleep on this night was beset by fearsome dreams wherein her father and brother fought Tom Caswell with relentless, implacable fury. . . .

DAYLIGHT, and a cold, clear sun lighted the steely, white world. The scarps of the mountains stood out in the distance like crystal monuments.

"We can break trail out today," Tom said reluctantly. "It's deep only in the drifts. The weather slopes have been swept clear by the wind. I'll ride with you to Chalk Rock today."

They were silent as they made ready. As Dolores kissed him, when he lifted her into the saddle, she had to fight back the tears. She looked back at the cabin as she rode away. She saw her own vast regret mirrored in Caswell's face. This was the finish of an idyl that might never come to them again.

They rode away through a silent, brittle world. Picking their way along a cleared slope, they heard the mournful bawling of cattle, and located a dozen head of Caswell's white-faced stock marooned in a drift-blocked gully.

Dolores worked like a Trojan, helping Caswell lead their horses back and forth to pack down a trail through which they could haze the cattle out of the trap. When they were finished, she was warm and rosy and pleased.

Grinning, Caswell threw an arm over her shoulder. "You'll make a cowman a good wife," he told her.

They rode on through sun-flecked timber. Then riders hove into view, coming toward them at a sweeping lope, their mounts blowing frost steam, hoofs ringing on frozen snow.

Dolores's nerves stiffened as she identified the powerful, fierce-eyed man who rode a blood bay stallion in the lead. It was her father, Bat McQueen.

An implacable grimness lay on Bat McQueen's weathered face as he drew up, glaring at Tom Caswell. Behind him were half a dozen hard-eyed riders, heavily garbed, but with their side guns and saddle rifles hung in easy reach.

Bat McQueen had eyes only for Cas-

well. He barely glanced at the boyish figure, muffled in a heavy storm coat and scarf, never dreaming that his own daughter could be here.

"Yuh seem to be in the habit of killin' Curly Q men, Caswell," the blunt Texan grated. "Ed Barker rode in two nights ago with Idaho Slim's body, sayin' you had ambushed 'em. I know it's useless to place a murder charge ag'in you. I tried that once, an' found that the law in this country don't favor Texans. There's a more direct way of gettin' justice than by jury trial."

Dolores knew the portent in her father's icy eyes. He had come to kill Tom Caswell!

She hurled her horse between them. "Dad!" she cried out. "Wait! You're wrong! Idaho Slim and Ed Barker tried to murder Tom. They brought it on themselves."

Bat McQueen was dazed. "Dody!" he muttered. "What are you doin' here?"

She shot a distraught glance at Caswell, and saw the wild incredulity in his face.

"Is—is Bat McQueen your father?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes. My name is Dolores McQueen."

She faced her father proudly. "I love Tom Caswell, Dad," she said clearly. "I hope to marry him."

That hit Bat McQueen like a blow. He seemed suddenly gray and sunken. "You love him?" he groaned. "You say you love the man who murdered your own brother?"

Dolores felt the world spin. "My—my brother?" she choked. "Dave? Why, Dave isn't dead, Dad! You can't mean that!"

"We found Dave with a bullet in his back a week ago," Bat McQueen intoned. "He was shot from ambush by this rustler you claim to love. Nobody seen the killin', but we trailed the killer's horse. That trail led to Tom Caswell's ranch. It was one of his horses that made the tracks."

Dolores fought off faintness. She looked into Caswell's taut face.

"Is that—is that true?" she panted.

He seemed to harden. "A woman who really loved me would not ask that question," he spoke stonily.

"And I loved my brother, too," she burst out.

She removed the hand she had laid on Caswell's arm. As in a dream, she rode blindly to her father's side. Bat McQueen saw in her face that same bewildered appeal he had met so many times when she was a child. He ran his arm around her, comfortingly.

"I don't savvy how you fooled her into this, Caswell," he gritted. "It's plain she didn't know what had happened to her brother. This is just one more black mark I'll put ag'in you."

But the killing lust had died in Bat McQueen. He wheeled and led his men away at a long lope, with Dolores riding blindly at his side.

The touch of Tom Caswell's lips still burned on her mouth. Even now, in spite of the shock of this revelation, the longing for him tore at her heart. But her brother, the tall, likable Dave, whom she had loved as only a sister can love a stalwart brother, was dead, with Caswell refusing to deny the crime. . . . And Dolores felt that part of herself had died.

She remembered the pledge they had made when Caswell first held her in his arms. "Nothing will ever change our love," she thought bitterly, and a sob came into her breast.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Dead or Alive!"

A LENGTH behind Dolores and her father loped a jauntily garbed rider, wide-shouldered, slim-waisted, with con-

fident, dark, handsome features. Monte Vickers, range boss of the northern Curly Q, had risen to a place of trust and authority with Bat McQueen in the past few months. With Dave McQueen dead, Monte Vickers was the cowman's chief reliance. . . . And now his inscrutable eyes rested on Dolores' firm and curving beauty, and a tight, assured smile hovered at his lips.

Dolores rode in silence. After two hours, the horses floundered through the deep snow into the yard of a sizeable ranch. The log-built main house had two wide wings, and still smelled of the fresh-cut cedar that girded its walls. This was the northern Curly Q headquarters.

It was Monte Vickers who lifted Dolores from her horse. He held her an instant longer than was necessary.

"You're beautiful," he murmured tensely in her ear. "I'll make you forget that a man like Tom Caswell ever existed."

Startled, she drew away and followed her father into the warmth of the main house. Her heart went out to Bat McQueen when she saw the way he had aged since spring. She went into his arms with a sob.

He drew her into his lap in front of the fireplace, as he had done so often when she was a child. And as simply as a child, she told him the story. When she described the shooting in the cabin, he straightened, frowning.

"That wasn't the way Barker told it to me," he interrupted. "He claimed Caswell shot them down when the blizzard drove them to find shelter at his place."

"Barker lies. They hid out there, waiting for Caswell. They would have murdered him in cold blood."

Her father tamped tobacco in his pipe. "Yuh—yuh love Caswell?" he asked reluctantly.

"I couldn't love a man who killed my brother," she sighed. "But I can't believe him guilty, even though he refused to deny it."

"Caswell is a hard, dangerous man," her father grated. "I'd gamble every dollar I own that he's the brains behind the rustlin' that has already cost us nigh a thousand head. He's the leader of the Thunder River pool of shoestring owners, who've bucked the Curly Q from the day we drove in here. Your brother Dave was murdered while he was trailing Caswell, in the hope of catching him so red-handed that even a local jury would have to send him over the road. Nobody seen the shootin', but the circumstantial evidence points to Caswell. Him an' Dave had come to the edge of a gunfight in town once or twice before that."

Silence came, except for the snap and sputter of the logs in the fireplace. Dolores' eyes were dead. Happiness had been in her grasp so briefly. Now it was gone, fading away like those red, roaring brands that were dissolving into gray ashes.

THE Curly Q cattle, not acclimated to the rigors of a Wyoming winter, had suffered heavily in the blizzard. The drifts covered scores of carcasses. Hundreds more were still down or marooned in the snow-choked coulees and deep timber, bawling mournfully, slowly starving.

Bat McQueen worked like a demon day after day, fighting to save his cattle. "If we lose this herd, we lose everything," he told Dolores grimly. "I ain't as rich as some people believe. I got caught two years ago, when the bottom fell out'n the beef market. The Frio ranch is mortgaged to the limit. A cutthroat syndicate in San Antone, headed by snakey Jake Nixon, owns the mortgage. Jake Nixon has hated me for thirty years. He'd like nothin' better than to take over the Curly Q, hide an' hoof.

"I've got a hunch that Jake Nixon, settin' down there in his San Antone bank,

could tell why my drift fences way up here in Wyoming have been cut durin' every blizzard, an' why I was rustled day an' night all last summer. It's my belief that Tom Caswell, an' this sneakin' pool of little ranchers, are drawin' expense money from Jake Nixon. If I lose this herd, I'm bankrupt. Jake Nixon will take over the Curly Q next July."

With an aching heart, Dolores watched him ride from dawn to dark in snow and bitter cold, driving the sullen, half-rebellious crew almost at gun's point to the work of tailing up the down cattle, digging drift, and hauling hay and salt.

She flinched whenever she saw the dozen, unsavory, hard-drinking riders who drew tophand pay from her father. When she criticized his choice of riders, he admitted their failings.

"They're damned poor cowhands," he growled. "But I'm payin' 'em for their gun savvy. They've got orders to shoot any long-loopin' rat they find runnin' Curly Q beef—men like Tom Caswell."

Tom Caswell! A week had passed, and still he had not come to her to deny the accusation against him. His continued silence seemed a confession of guilt.

Monte Vickers, with his handsome assurance and wise, all-seeing eyes, was her father's mainstay. Vickers lived in the house, and had Bat McQueen's confidence. Dolores found him intruding more and more into her own life. He was educated, and never failed to offer the little attentions the feminine heart craves. And he had a certain magnetism.

She knew he was subtlely beginning to make love to her. But only Tom Caswell filled her heart. Desperately she tried to put Caswell out of her thoughts. That episode in her life seemed definitely ended. He had not made the slightest attempt to come to her and explain. It was ended. All that remained of her love was a scar on her soul.

But forgetting Caswell was impossible. She often wept silently, heart-brokenly, in her room.

Bat McQueen counted his blizzard losses, and found some consolation. "Five or six hundred head went under," he told Dolores at the evening meal. "An' last summer an' fall Caswell an' his rustlers took about a thousand head. However, I've still got more than eight thousand steers. If I can rough 'em through, I'll sell enough to stand off Jake Nixon an' his foreclosures. Beef prices are risin'."

Dolores evaded Vickers' attempt to draw her into a checker game after the meal, and went to her room. She got ready for bed, and was combing out the golden cascade of her hair, when a hand tapped softly on her door.

She knew that her father and Vickers were in the living room, smoking their pipes, for she could hear the intermittent murmur of their conversation. The Chinese cook had gone to bed in the leanto. . . Her heart suddenly began to quicken. Intuition told her who was there. Caswell!

HER hands shook as she frantically pulled a robe over her nightdress. She tried to tell herself that she should not answer that summons, but the longing in her heart was too compelling. She realized now that through all these days she had been yearning for him, waiting for him to come and defend himself—to deny his guilt.

She was colorless and quivering as she opened the door, Caswell stood there in the unheated hallway, with the red glow of her bedroom fire striking dark planes of shadows on his face. Evidently he had entered through the kitchen. The door leading into the main living room was closed, and she could still hear Vickers and her father talking.

"You shouldn't—shouldn't have come here," she breathed shakily.

His lean face looked drawn and pinched by frost and freezing wind. Frozen snow

caked the cuffed bottoms of his jeans above his boots. He had a six-shooter holstered outside his rough saddle coat.

"Some of the pool outfits were hit hard by the blizzard," he said in explanation. "I've been helping tail up, an' feed. But for that, I'd have come long ago."

"Why did you come at all?" she asked, fighting to hold aloof from him.

"Because I love you, and you love me," he stated. "I couldn't stay away."

Black disappointment beat at Dolores. He was not coming to her in humbleness nor apology. He was offering no denial of the awful thing of which he was accused, nor making any explanation.

"You are charged with killing my brother," she said dully. "Do you think I can love a man who did a thing like that?"

She saw his hard pride that spurned any defense. "You told me nothing could change your love," he responded. "I came to take you with me. You'll learn you were right in loving me."

The living room door swung open suddenly, admitting a flood of lamplight. Her father stood framed there, a cocked six-shooter in his hand. With a growl of fury, he lifted the muzzle.

Dolores, with a choked cry, leaped in front of Caswell, and though he tried to thrust her aside, she clung to him, remaining there as a shield.

"Dad!" she screamed. "Not that! Not that!"

Bat McQueen yielded to the tragic appeal in her face. Slowly he lowered the gun.

"You had better go, Caswell," he said hoarsely. "You are not welcome in this house."

Caswell looked at Dolores. "Will you go with me?"

She shook her head. "No."

"I'll come again," he told her slowly. "I'll never quit loving you, and you will never love any other man but me."

He turned and walked out of the house by the way he had entered. The door closed behind him. Dolores fled into her room, shutting herself in, and threw herself on the bed. She gave way to a racking outburst of grief. Why wouldn't he at least defend himself? She had argued with her father that a guilty man wouldn't have left so plain a trail, that someone had framed Caswell. But Bat McQueen had been unconvinced.

A gun bellowed outside the house, bringing her from the bed with a leap. Shattered glass fell into the living room. She heard Monte Vickers lift a frenzied shout somewhere outside. Vickers' gun then began rolling its brazen, clamorous echoes in the frozen darkness.

Dolores raced into the living room. She screamed out pitifully. Her father lay sprawled face up on the floor, with a bullet hole in his forehead. Bat McQueen was dead! Nearby the bitter wind poured through a broken window.

Monte Vickers burst in, a powder-tinged six-shooter in his hand.

"It was Caswell," he gritted. "He shot your dad through the window. I smoked him up, but he got to his horse an' fogged it."

Dolores knelt beside her dead father. Her face was like marble.

"Run him down," she said. Her voice did not sound like her own. "Bring him back dead or alive. I'll give a thousand dollars to the man who avenges my father."

She was still there, kneeling beside Bat McQueen's body, as Vickers led the crew away at a long lope on Caswell's trail.

CHAPTER FIVE

Prisoner of Love

DOLORES dismounted on a low bluff that overlooked the Curly Q spread. The balmy breeze of early May fingered

softly through her hair and caressed her throat. The high country was still robed in white, but the chinook had driven winter from Thunder River Valley, and there was the promise of awakening grass and wild flowers in the air.

More than two months had passed since the night the crew swept away to hunt down Tom Caswell. They had traced him fifty miles into the wild, snow-choked depths of the Thunder River range, and then a snowstorm had wiped out his trail. Since then, men had tried time and again to claim the reward that Dolores had offered, but without finding any sign of their quarry.

Monte Vickers had picked up rumors that Caswell was riding with an outlaw bunch headed by a notorious desperado named Hatchet Tripp, who hid out somewhere deep in the Thunder River Mountains.

"It was in his blood," Vickers had shrugged. "Tom Caswell has reached his level, at last—an out-and-out owlhooter and killer."

Dolores had laid awake many hours at night, dry-eyed, and hopeless, thinking about it.

As she stood there on the low bluff, she could see the granite headstones that marked the burial place of her father and brother. Her cheeks were thinner, and her eyes looked darker and bigger. She had almost forgotten how to smile.

Now that the snows were gone, rustling was starting again, and Monte Vickers and his swaggering gun crew seemed unable to stem it. Vickers told her that losses were light, but she knew better. Living all her life on a ranch, she could estimate a range herd with the acumen of an experienced cowman. The losses were far heavier than Vickers wanted to admit. No doubt he did not want to worry her.

In addition, she was already receiving ominous word from the creditors of the main ranch in Texas. The wolves were gathering around the old Curly Q, licking their chops, ready to close in. Letters from old Ike Pryer, the trusted foreman who was rodding the main spread on the Frio, were not encouraging. It had been a poor grazing year on the Frio, with hollow horn and Spanish fever decimating the main brand.

The tide of fortune was ebbing away from the Curly Q. Dolores felt helpless and bewildered, as she stood there on this spring day. Except for Monte Vickers, she had no one to turn to. The Curly Q had no friends in the Thunder River country. Some of the hot-headed pool

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ranchers even publicly praised Tom Caswell for wiping out "that damned grass-hog, Bat McQueen."

Dolores looked up at the approach of a rider. Monte Vickers, his red neckerchief rippling jauntily, loped from the timber, and stepped down at her side. For weeks he had been making love to her with increasing ardor. He took both of her hands now, with an assured smile.

"I've been watching you, Dolores," he said. "You are so beautiful, standing here with the sun in your hair. You tear the heart right out of a man. I can't go on like this, being near you day after day. I want you. You know how much I love you."

Dolores looked up at him reflectively. She was lonely. Her life seemed utterly empty. Monte Vickers was strong. At times, she had seen a flash of an underlying hardness in his nature, but there was also a mystery about him that had a fascination.

"I don't love you, Monte," she said flatly. "But you've been kind to me. I appreciate that. You've worked hard for the Curly Q."

"Not for the Curly Q," he said impatiently. "For you. You're worth working for. You'll learn to love me. I'm wild about you, mad about you. I can think of nothing but you."

"Wait, Monte!" she protested. "I don't know. I owe you an awful lot, I suppose. But I don't want to talk about love."

He misunderstood her attitude for coquetry. Violently, he gathered her in his arms.

"You do love me," he insisted. "You can't help yourself."

He sought her lips, holding her helpless in his arms. A sudden revulsion swept Dolores. She felt soiled and cheapened. She realized that the real Monte Vickers had come to the surface. Here was a hard, domineering man, ruthless in his purposes, unbridled in his desires. He had not mentioned the subject of marriage to her.

She fought to break away, suddenly furious, but he only laughed and drew her closer.

He was suddenly torn away from her. Dolores glimpsed the rugged, long-jawed face that had haunted her dreams through all those weary weeks. It was the face of the man she had given up as dead—Tom Caswell!

SHE saw the lift and heave of Caswell's shoulders as he hit Monte Vickers on the jaw. Vickers had started for his gun, but that punch sent him reeling back. Caswell struck again, with ruthless deliberation. Monte Vickers fell like a log, and lay still.

Caswell turned his level eyes on Dolores. She was swept by a sudden panic. She turned like a startled deer to escape, but his hand stayed her with an unyielding gentleness.

"I told you I'd come back," he said. "I'm here to take you with me, Dolores."

"No!" she panted wildly. "Let me go."

"You love me, Dolores."

"How could you say that? You murdered my father and my brother. I have offered a reward for your capture, dead or alive."

"You say these things only with your voice, and not with your heart," he declared. "Deep down, you can't believe them."

"What else is there to believe?" she choked. "All your actions have been those of a guilty man."

He looked down at the dazed Vickers. "Does this fellow mean anything to you?" he asked harshly.

Her chin lifted. She looked at him with silent scorn, refusing to answer. Suddenly he lifted her in his arms, and turned toward her horse. She beat at his face with little clenched fists, for a moment. Then she found that she could no longer

bring herself to strike him, though she continued to twist her slim body in an attempt to break free.

He lifted her on her horse, and led it into the timber. His own mount, a wiry buckskin, was waiting there, and he mounted beside her.

"We're riding together," he said gruffly.

Dolores was pale and panting. "You've robbed me," she breathed. "You've stolen my cattle, and killed the ones I love. Now you kidnap me."

He did not answer, as he swung the rowel ends on the flanks of her pony. They rode away together at a lope.

When sundown came they were fifty miles north of the ranch, mounting into wild, wind-carved badlands at the base of the mountains. Long after dark, high on the flank of the Thunder River range, he lifted her down at a rude shack, well-hidden in thick timber. The shack showed evidence of long occupation, and she realized that this was where Caswell had wintered.

She remembered the stories Vickers had told her about Caswell riding with Hatchet Tripp and his wild bunch, but she saw plainly that this had been the abode of only one man.

Caswell cooked a meal over the little rock cook place in the shack, and Dolores accepted the plain fare without comment. In spite of herself, her mind harked back, in dismal contrast, to that blissful idyl in his stormbound ranchhouse months ago.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked at last, coldly.

"Once you made a promise," he returned quietly, "that nothing would ever come between us. You broke that promise."

He suddenly lifted her to her feet, forced her to look into his face. His taciturn calm was shattered, and she saw the torture in his soul. His stubborn pride had broken at last.

"Good God, Dolores!" he burst out. "I didn't kill your brother, nor did I kill your father."

For an instant a mighty joy rushed up in her. She fought it back.

"It's too late now to deny it," she breathed wearily. "Vickers saw you fire the bullet that killed dad."

She saw the gray hardness steal back into his face, as he stood holding her in his arms.

"Vickers," he murmured. His glance drove into her. "Do you love Monte Vickers?"

"What right have you to ask?"

He was relentless. "Answer me. Do you care for him? Does he mean anything to you?"

The fierce insistence in his tone frightened her. She sensed, somehow, that the whole course of her life hinged on her answer. Intuitively, she realized that if she nodded her head, Tom Caswell would turn away, leave her—and that she would never see him again. Something stronger than her womanly pride forced the denial from her.

"No! I could never love Vickers."

He seemed to draw a mighty sigh of thanksgiving, and it was as though a new hope and life had flowed back into him. She saw a vast tenderness come into his eyes now, and it was the same expression she remembered from those dreamy days during the blizzard. This was the Tom Caswell who had haunted her dreams.

He gently released her. He spread soogans and blankets on the rude bunk, and shouldered a second bed roll.

"I'll turn in outside," he said.

"Thank you," she murmured stiffly.

She lay awake for hours, stirred by conflicting hope and doubt. Caswell's denial of guilt kept ringing through her mind. She knew now that she could never forget him, no matter what the outcome of this affair. Love of this kind could not be put aside.

But neither could she forget the cold, black facts. He had fled like a guilty man from the scene, hiding away for months. All his actions had been damning. She believed her heart was betraying her into seeking excuses for the destroyer of her loved ones.

She wondered why he had brought her here forcibly. Perhaps to inflict his will upon her. She armed herself to resist him. She would never surrender to him. It was unthinkable. . . .

SHE slept fitfully at last. Awakening at dawn, the blue cold of the high country pinched her exposed ears and nose as she lay there, snugly wrapped in the blankets.

Caswell tapped on the door and asked if he could enter. After a moment's hesitation, she responded indifferently. He brought in an armload of firewood. She flushed as she saw the way his glance rested with longing on her sleep-touseled hair.

He built a fire, then left so that she could dress. Afterwards, as he fried flapjacks and smoky, he looked at her keenly.

"We're riding today, if you feel rested," he said. "There are things in these mountains that I want you to see and know."

After he had lifted her into the saddle, he handed her the six-shooter he had taken from Monte Vickers. "Keep it handy," he remarked. "No telling when you might need it."

Dolores' nerves began to tighten then, as she watched him buckle two weighted holsters outside his coat.

He led the way steadily up the soaring mountainside. Within two hours they were in the snow fields, working their way up perilous, icy slants, skirting dizzy depths. They crossed a sawtooth summit at noon, and Dolores saw far below a deep mountain basin, carpeted in thick evergreen timber, and girded on all sides by high, snow-capped ridges. Half a dozen miles to the south lay what seemed to be an easier entrance into this mountain-locked valley.

They descended by a tedious route. She noticed that Caswell followed cover at all times, and that he advanced with increasing wariness as they neared the bottom.

They left the snow behind, and at last rode through a gloomy sea of lodgepoles on the basin floor.

The sudden crashing of brush off to their left almost startled a scream from Dolores. Her nerves relaxed when she saw it was only a spooked steer. Then she stood up in the stirrups, staring, as she saw the animal's brand. It was Curly Q—her own brand!

She shot a swift glance at Caswell, but he remained silent. They rode cautiously on. Another steer was flushed, and soon half a dozen more. All wore the Curly Q mark.

Dolores began to quiver. This remote basin was fully seventy miles from the Curly Q range on Thunder River. These were not drift cattle or strays. . . .

Caswell dismounted at last, lifted her down, and tied up the horses. "No talk from here on," he whispered.

He led the way down a muddy coulee. Sundown was near, when he climbed a low clay bank and peered over the coulee rim, using a clump of chokeberry brush as a screen. He reached down and gave her a hand, lifting her beside him. He braced her there on the muddy wall with his arm around her waist.

Dolores peered. She was looking out into a clearing in the timber. A dozen rods away stood a rip-rap corral that held a shaggy remuda. Three unshaved, rough-looking men were profanely shoeing a wild-eyed horse near the corral gate. Beyond the enclosure rose a sizeable, sod-roofed shack. Whiskey bottles had been chinked into the window frames to admit light. From the rude rock chimney, lifted a faint curl of woodsmoke.

Dolores stared at a handsome, blaze-faced sorrel which stood saddled at the shack. It was Monte Vickers' private top horse.

At that moment Vickers himself stepped from the shack, followed by a sallow-skinned man with sunken, cadaverous eyes.

"Hatchet Tripp, outlaw, highwayman and general all-around badman," Caswell whispered in her ear. He turned his head suddenly. "Listen!"

Dolores heard a faint sound in the timber. It grew into the popping of rope ends and the rumble of cloven hoofs. A string of wild-eyed steers, muddy and footsore from a fast drive, came lumbering into view, with half a dozen riders hazing them along into the basin.

The riders, with a final whoop, sent the fifty head of cattle scattering away into the timber, then rode up to the shack and dismounted. They were Dolores's own riders. She had grown all too familiar with their hard, insolent faces during her two months at the Thunder River ranch. And the cattle they had turned loose in this remote basin were her own Curly Q stock.

CHAPTER SIX

Valley of Lost Hopes

DOLORES silently lowered herself to the coulee bottom, and stood with bowed head as Caswell joined her. A wild elation swept her, mingled with humbleness and contrition.

"This is where my rustled cattle have gone," she said brokenly. "My own riders—my own range boss! No wonder they never could find any trace of the thieves."

Tom Caswell took her in his arms, lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. "This is why I brought you here. This is why I was afraid you might have learned to care for Vickers."

Bitter tears were in her eyes, and the light of revelation was there, too. "It was Vickers who murdered my dad, wasn't it?" she choked. "It could have been no one else. He fired that shot, and put the blame on you. I've been a blind fool. To think how I've tried to hate you!"

"But you never did," he said. "You always had faith in me. You had faith, because you loved me."

She drew him close, her lips clinging to his.

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After a time Tom explained. "Vickers, or some of his crew, probably killed your brother that night last winter. It was part of the scheme to keep your father's suspicions diverted to me and the pool ranchers. Vickers and his crew have run more than four thousand head of your cattle into this basin. He worked a slick scheme. Vickers started trouble with the pool owners, right from the start, to cover his own operations. But just why he is stocking this basin with stolen cattle is more than I can savvy. There's only one pass over which cattle can be driven in or out. He can't get rid of a bunch like this without being caught."

"I know why," she said grimly. "They only need to hold them here for another month or so. Monte Vickers must be the tool of a Texas syndicate that is out to ruin the Curly Q. They aim to hide out stock here until the creditors close in. Once the syndicate comes into control, these rustled cattle would be driven back to the Curly Q range again, and nobody would ever be the wiser."

"I didn't know the Curly Q was in so deep," he frowned.

"It's on the verge of bankruptcy. But that doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter?"

She looked at him tenderly. "No. I haven't eaten my heart out for months worrying about money. Damn money, and damn cattle! Every minute of the time I kept trying to make myself hate you—and all I did was to keep breaking my heart over and over."

"Forgive me," he said huskily, and kissed her.

"Forgive *you?* Oh, my dear! I'm the one who—"

"No," he cut in. "I deliberately let Vickers hang your father's murder on me so I could hide out and look around. Up to that time, Vickers had been able to keep watch on every move I made. As a fugitive, I had a free hand. It took two months to find the cattle trail into this basin. And all the time I was wondering if I had lost you. If that had happened even the exposure of Vickers would have been an empty thing."

"I'm so happy," she breathed.

As she lifted her lips, her eyes marked a man who stood on the coulee rim—staring down at them!

IT WAS one of the outlaws who had been busy shoeing a horse a few minutes earlier. Just what turn of fate had caused him to wander to the coulee rim, Dolores never knew. The outlaw, startled by his discovery, was starting his frenzied draw.

She saw his gun clear the holster. She shoved Caswell aside as the .45 roared. She felt the bullet twitch at her hair.

Caswell twisted around, his right gun flipping into his hand. His first shot came as a quick echo to the outlaw's. He triggered again. The swart man on the rim reeled back sickly, fell out of sight. Dolores heard his body writhing in the brush.

Caswell leaped to her side. "Are you all right?" he panted.

"I'll live to make you a good wife," she told him wildly.

Then they were running hand in hand back up the coulee. Confused shouting arose from the outlaw shack and settled into a deep mutter that made Dolores think of bloodhounds. The pursuit had started.

Caswell uttered an exclamation of dismay as he heard horses sweeping along on the coulee rim.

"They're bound to cut us off from our horses," he snapped. He pushed her ahead. "I'll draw their attention. Get to the ponies—an' ride. It'll be dark soon. Work your way out of here at all costs. Go out by the way we came. The low pass is guarded."

He was already climbing out of the

coulee. "Tom!" she protested frantically. "My dear! Don't leave me! Don't!"

He glanced back, and she saw the power of his affection for her as never before. "I love you," he said.

Then he was racing away.

She heard a wild shout. "There he is! This way, boys! He's runnin' fer that blackjack thicket ahead. He's on foot. It's Caswell. Holy smoke! It's Tom Caswell!"

A gun began punching long, echoing reports. Dolores suppressed a heart-broken scream. She scrambled to a vantage point, and saw riders careening into deep brush a short distance away, their guns poised.

One was Monte Vickers. Six-shooters began to paint lurid smears of flame in the gloomy blackjack, where dusk was gathering. The firing was wild and scattered at first. Then it increased to a mad tempo.

"There he is! Look out! He's made a stand. He's shootin'!"

The speaker's voice ended in a strangled cough. A horse plunged out of the brush, dragging a dangling body. The roar of guns went on in the thicket.

Another man lifted a hoarse yell. "He's down! I got him, boys! Plugged him dead through the head!"

A dry, stricken sound came from Dolores. She heard the outlaws race to a common point. The shooting ended. Jubilant profanity arose. She let herself slide lifelessly to the coulee bottom.

"He's dead," she said tonelessly.

Caswell had sacrificed himself to give her a chance to escape. But escape seemed unimportant now. Nothing mattered any longer. She stood there without will or ambition or hope.

Then Monte Vickers' crisp voice came clearly. "He's alive! Hell, yuh only creased him, Ben! Wait, damn you! Don't finish him—yet. I want to work him over first, an' make him tell what he did with the McQueen girl. I want that little fillie for myself."

DOLORES' heart was thudding. Caswell was not dead! It was like a reprieve from her own grave. He was alive!

Then her hopes tumbled. He was the prisoner of Vickers, doomed to torture—and then death! She stood an instant, thinking, then went racing up the coulee. Her own presence had not been suspected. They took it for granted that Caswell had been alone. The only outlaw who had seen Dolores was dead.

She reached the two horses, her hair down, her face and hands torn by the brush. She mounted her own pony, leaving Tom's animal tied to the tree.

At a distance she pulled up in the increasing darkness, listening. She could hear riders moving around, and an occasional profane call. At last came the shout she had counted on. They had found Caswell's horse. She prayed they would not look around for bootmarks or hoof tracks. She depended on the darkness to forestall that.

She drew a deep, heart-felt breath as she heard them ride away, heading back to the shack. Her strategy had worked.

After five minutes' wait, she rode warily in the direction of the shack. Presently she dismounted and worked her way on foot to the north side of the clearing. Crouching in the dark brush, she studied the outlaw bunk shack, which stood fifty yards away. The mountain night was settling swiftly. The moon was masked by deep cloudbanks over the mountain heads to the east.

The outlaws had left their horses ground-tied in front of the shack. She could hear the hum of voices inside. Shadows moved across the weak candlelight that streamed from the bottle-chinked windows and the door cracks.

She decided they were all inside. Palm-

ing the six-shooter that Caswell had given her, she moved silently out into the open, stooping low. She reached the west wall of the shack safely, but her heart was pounding so loud she wondered that they did not hear it inside.

She found an opening in the mud chinking. In her line of vision sat Caswell, bound to a bench. He was pale, and the left side of his face was matted with drying blood from a scalp wound.

Monte Vickers, his mouth hard and cruel, stood in front of him.

"Talk, damn yuh!" Vickers snarled. "Where's the McQueen girl?"

He struck Caswell with his open palm. The blow left a vivid crimson splotch on the bound man's cheek.

Caswell smiled back with cold contempt. "She's safe enough," he answered. "You're through in this range, Vickers. Dolores knows where her cattle are, and she knows you murdered her father and brother. You'll look pretty wearing a rope necktie. So will you, Hatchet, an' the rest of you boys."

Hatchet Tripp cursed him from the background. The other outlaws and rustlers, who squatted or stood around the room, stirred uneasily. Their eyes were moody under their hatbrims.

Hatchet Tripp spat nervously, his thin neck working. "Maybe he's callin' the turn, at that, Monte," he growled. "The jig is up. It was a long gamble, right from the start, as I told yuh when I threw in with you last spring. Caswell is no fool. He wouldn't come in here alone. There's more of 'em somewhere around. This place is right unhealthy, I figger. We're bound to have callers before long. Plenty of 'em. I say to pull out while the trail is open."

A mutter of agreement arose. "We've played out our string," a tough outlaw agreed. "I got a yearnin' to put chunks of country between me an' this place before sunup."

"Keep your hair on," Vickers snarled. "Caswell is tryin' to stampede you. If he had any gun-help close at hand, we'd have been burning powder by this time." He turned on Caswell. "Where's the girl? Was she out there with you?"

"I'd be a fool to bring a girl into this place," Caswell said coolly.

Hatchet Tripp cursed. "We're wastin' time, Monte."

Vickers' eyes were deadly. "Stick that running iron into the fire, Hatchet," he snarled. "Hot iron softens the toughest of 'em."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Partners Unto Death

DOLORES had a sick, terrible feeling as she watched the outlaw leader thrust a curved iron into the hot embers of the fireplace.

She studied the hard faces around the room, saw their doubt and uncertainty. These men's nerves were on edge. They feared being trapped by a posse. They reminded her of uneasy cattle, ready to stampede on the slightest excuse.

She looked at the ground-tied horses which were well-bunched nearby, cropping at new green shoots. Her nerves were suddenly like ice as she moved toward them.

She picked up a rock and hurled it against the flank of the nearest animal. The horse gave a startled bound, exciting the rest of the animals. She lifted her gun and fired a roaring shot over their backs. With a thunder of hoofs, the horses wheeled in a panic and stampeded away.

Instantly she darted back to the shack corner, crouching down in the shadows.

"They're comin'," Hatchet Tripp bawled frenziedly. "Damn yuh, Vickers, we're in a tight—"

The rest of it was drowned out by a frantic rush of men through the door.

Guns in hand, the outlaws came hurtling out. The only thought in their minds was fear of being trapped in the shack. They scattered as they cleared the door, scuttling like rabbits for cover in the dark brush.

Dolores arose as the last of them went speeding away. She darted around the corner, leaped through the door, and slammed it behind her.

Panting, the six-shooter in her hand, she stood there with her back against the door—looking into the startled, glittering eyes of Monte Vickers!

Vickers had not gone out with the rush. He stood over Tom Caswell, his gun cocked, and she understood that he had tarried a moment to make sure that Caswell would not live to talk.

For the space of a heart-beat, Vickers glared incredulously at her. Then his quick mind grasped the strategy by which she had cleared her path to Caswell's side.

"Why, yuh damned little—" he began to snarl, and he veered his gun on her with murderous fury.

Dolores fired instantly. She felt the jar of the recoil, and felt the hot flash that leaped at her from Vickers' gun. She remembered afterwards that his bullet had slapped into the door within an inch of her cheek.

Through the powder haze, she saw Monte Vickers twisting around and around, clutching at a bullet-shattered shoulder. He sank numbly to his knees, moaning.

Dolores leaped to Caswell's side. "The knife!" he said. "There on the table, you game little sweetheart! Cut me free!"

She obeyed. "My dear, my dear!" she kept panting as she slit the thongs that held him. "They meant to torture you."

He kissed her as he came to his feet. He picked up Vickers' gun.

Silence had come outside. The outlaws, reaching cover, had paused to take stock.

Hatchet Tripp's hoarse voice sounded. "What the hell! There's nobody in sight. Who fired that shot?"

A confused rumble of voices lifted.

Tripp shouted again: "Vickers? Where in blazes are yuh?"

CASWELL bent and swung Monte Vickers' dazed form across his shoulder.

"We'll run for it," he gritted. "Stay behind me, dear."

He blew out the lamp. With Dolores beside him, her hand lightly on his arm, he opened the door.

A gasp of dismay came from Dolores. The full moon had come out from behind the clouds, and its light struck them squarely. She heard the startled shout that went up from the outlaws.

"It's that girl," Tripp bellowed. "She stampeded us, an' turned Caswell loose. Burn 'em down!"

Caswell leaped out of the door, dragging her along. A bullet sang between them, buried itself in the pole wall. The night seemed to explode as every outlaw opened up frenziedly on them.

It was only two strides to the corner, and they made it, with bullets whistling around them. Dolores felt a slug rip the sleeve of her jacket, and one grazed her shoulder. She gave a cry of fear as she heard another bury in flesh and bone.

Then they were around the corner, momentarily sheltered from the guns. Caswell swung Vickers' limp weight around, and looked into his face. He let the body drop, and they raced away.

"Dead!" he panted. "One of those bullets got him right through the head."

They sped toward the dark wall of brush. Outlaws came into view behind them, and opened up again. Caswell slowed his pace a stride, forcing her ahead of him so that his body was a shield. She heard his gun explode twice. She glanced over her shoulder as she ran. Plainly in the moonlight, she saw Hatchet

Tripp's thin body collapsing, while to his right a second outlaw was reeling around like a drunken man.

A bullet came thundering at them from their right, and Dolores, without pausing her stride, sent two shots in that direction. She heard a man cough and stumble.

They dove into the brush. Bullets harried them, but they changed direction and were endangered only by wild shots. The pursuit halted at the edge of the brush.

"Git in there an' head 'em off," someone bawled.

"You do it," another man returned, cursing. "That hombre shoots for keeps. He got Hatchet an' Vickers, an' it looks like Buck an' Trig was done for as I passed 'em. His medicine is poison."

The outlaws, leaderless now, had no ambition to crowd Tom Caswell in the blind darkness of the timber.

Dolores and Tom now heard men racing around, rounding up horses. After a time the thud of hoofs swelled up, then began to dwindle.

They stopped. "They're—they're pulling out," Dolores breathed.

Now that Tom and she were safe, reaction suddenly struck at her. She began to sob and shake. Caswell picked her up then, and carried her. She clung to him, kissing him, sobbing and laughing at the same time.

"We'll never be apart, even for a day again," she said. "Never! Never! I love you so much, Tom! Nothing will ever come between us again."

"Nothing," he vowed.

TWO days later a fast-riding posse intercepted half a dozen of Tripp's and Vickers' men as they headed for Jackson's Hole. Two of them died in the fight that followed, and four were taken prisoners. It was Tom Caswell who led the posse.

One of the captured men gave evidence at the trial that sent a Texas banker named Jake Nixon, with three of his associates, to prison.

The last echoes of the Curly Q conspiracy, which had dragged through the courts for a year, were dying away about the time that a son was born to Mrs. Tom Caswell at the northern ranch of the Curly Q on Thunder River.

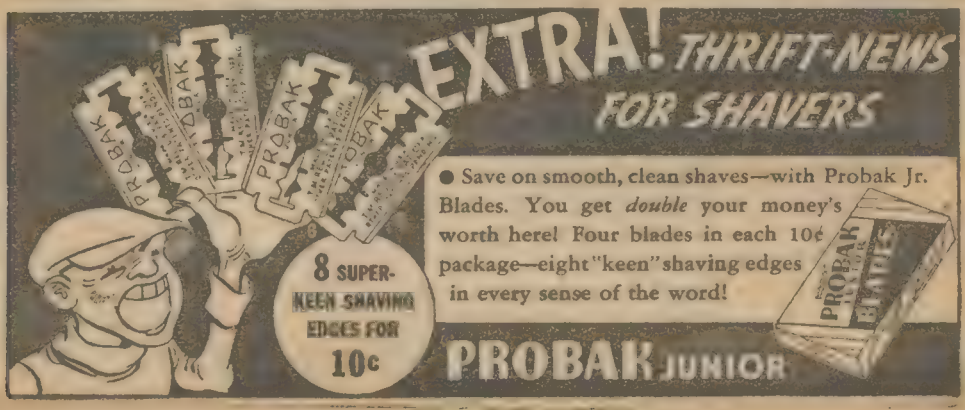
The wife of one of the pool ranchers placed the new heir to the McQueen brand in the arms of his father.

Tom Caswell hardly looked at the little, red-faced bundle. "Dolores?" he breathed hoarsely. "Is she—is she—"

"She's in there waiting for you to come and kiss her—and tell her how proud you are of your son. Brace up, you big lout! It's all over. I believe even you'll pull through in time."

Tom Caswell looked at his son then. And he went on in to where his dark-eyed, golden-haired wife was waiting for him, smiling.

THE END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Cupid Stops the Stage

By Aline Ballard

He ignored her, spoke sharply to the driver: "Get going."

All the dashing, masked caballero wanted, when his sixgun stopped the stage, was—Penny Hatton. . . . And all she asked for, from the depths of her love-brimming, adventure-mad heart, were the protecting, comforting arms of a man who would fight to win her!

AT NOON the stagecoach stopped briefly. "Be in Santa Fé by sundown," the driver called out.

He turned and looked at Penny. Prettiest gal he'd seen in forty year. Not

forward, like the Spanish señoritas, but spirit a-plenty. A body could tell, just to look at the sparkle in them brown eyes.

He had taken over the coach the night before. "Yup. Santa Fé by sundown—barrin' we don't meet up with trouble," he said, and chuckled into his ragged mustache.

Penelope Hatton, forcing herself to sit quietly in the corner seat that had been hers the long weeks of the overland trip, felt her heart leap. Santa Fé—end of the trail! City of romance and adventure; of hot-headed caballeros; and—if the stories Mrs. Biddle, who occupied the seat next to her, had told her were true—of daring women!

In Santa Fé, anything might happen. Penny's cheeks glowed with anticipation.

The trip itself had been uneventful. There'd been no glimpses of feathered Indians, no roaring rivers to ford, not even a fight between men. Not for the world would she have admitted it—to do so would have sounded unladylike—but Penelope felt a sense of disappointment.

The driver cracked his whip. The coach jolted forward. Santa Fé. . . . Her thoughts trailed off drowsily.

The coach, pitching and tossing, awakened her. It lurched to a stop so suddenly that she plunged forward, almost off the seat.

"Well!" she exclaimed petulantly.

And at that instant Mrs. Biddle screamed and slid to the floor. Her view through the far window thus unobstructed, Penelope's widening eyes saw the reason for their abrupt stop, the reason for her fellow traveler's terror.

Out there, on horseback, was a man with a black handkerchief over his face. A hold-up!

"Oh!" The girl's breath released itself in an excited gasp.

She had heard tales of the bad men of the West—and this was one!

But he looked rather splendid, as he faced them astride a great golden horse. His tight trousers were laced with silver, his leather jacket fringed and beaded, his hat magnificently broad of brim and high of crown. The sun glittered on the barrel of the gun levelled unwaveringly at them.

But he was alone. Just one man! And the driver was sitting like a ninny on his box. The passengers, too—those two men from Boston, who had been so solicitous of her comfort all the way, were cowering now, blue and quivering. . . . Why didn't someone do something?

He sat there nonchalantly. The mask covered his face, but Penny got an impression he was smiling. He was laughing because they were all such cowards, probably.

"Nobody's going to get hurt," he assured them, "if Miss Hatton will just come out."

FOR a second Penny sat stunned. Then her anger flared. Slim fingers slid into the deep pocket of her skirt and closed around the tiny pistol she had put there before she left Atlanta.

If he thought she'd step out calmly, he had another guess coming! If he wanted her, let him come and get her! She leaned back in the seat.

On the floor, Mrs. Biddle burst into sobs. "Go, go! He'll shoot us all, if you don't."

And one of the men, the craven, stuttered: "She's right. It's you he wants. You—you'd better go."

So—she was to be thrown to the lion to save them! At least, no one should accuse her of cowardice.

"Very well," she said.

And taking her full skirts in one soft, white hand, she stepped down as daintily as if she were going to a ball. Head high, she walked toward the muzzle of that gun.

It was one of Samuel Colt's new revolving pistols. Upset as she was, she

had time to notice that. And from the belt that circled the man's lean hips, protruded the wooden haft of a hunting knife.

"Well?" she inquired scornfully.

He ignored her, spoke sharply to the driver: "Get going."

Now was the time for her to flash her pistol. She had an instant's vision of how tiny and futile it would look, compared to the one covering her.

Then, stunned, she heard the whip crack. The horses leaped forward.

Penelope's eyes blazed. The driver was leaving her—the coward! The fool! He'd pay for this when he got to Santa Fé. Wait till her uncle found out what had happened! . . . But, where would she be then?

For a second, fear replaced her anger. And then she stiffened. At that instant the tall figure leaned low from the saddle. An arm flashed out and scooped her up, as easily as if she were a sack of meal—and as ignominiously. He set her in front of him and held her there, her skirts rumpled and caught up halfway to her knees. She tried to pull them down.

He laughed. "I won't look. Make yourself comfortable."

Again rage choked her. "You—what do you think you're doing?" she gasped. "You'll pay for this."

"Abducting, I believe, is the word. Abducting you, my dear. And the pleasure is worth whatever I have to pay, I assure you."

Suddenly all the stories she had heard of this wild, lawless country came surging into her mind. No respect for women, Mrs. Biddle had said. . . . "Not that most of them deserve it, the painted hussies!"

But Penny wasn't Spanish. She was American, a girl from a land where respect for women was the one unbreakable law. Chivalry, she had begun to suspect, didn't count here.

"You can't run off with me." But in spite of herself, her voice quavered.

"Can't I?"

She felt him lean forward. His lips brushed her ear.

"Why didn't you pull that pistol you reached for a moment ago? Or perhaps it isn't a pistol? Perhaps it's smelling salts." More laughter in his voice. "Or a sewing kit. That's it, of course. Well brought-up young ladies always carry them, I'm told. Don't tell me you meant to stab me with your scissors."

She did carry just such a case. But wouldn't he be surprised if he knew what else lay beside it! She began to struggle to reach her pocket.

"Be still," he ordered, "or I'll bite your ear. A very pretty ear, by the way, the little bit I can see under those flying red curls."

The tousled red head flung itself back and banged him in the chin. Her hand, free at last, came up and snatched the black cloth away, the trail of her fingers leaving a scarlet mark just above his smiling mouth.

"Thank you," he murmured. "I was beginning to find that a little uncomfortable."

MOCKERY lay in his eyes as well as his voice. They were bluer than any eyes she had ever seen. They looked straight into hers, surrendering not one whit to her beauty nor her power. Here, something told her, was a man worth conquering.

Her heart beat suddenly faster. For the space of moments, she forgot defiance.

They were galloping across level country. Ahead of them, hills arose, brown and covered with some low vegetation. When they came close, she saw that the green was the green of pine trees, low and squat, as if they had been too lazy to grow.

The horse plunged into an opening between the hills, and stopped. The man

swung himself and her to the ground. He whistled. Instantly a spotted pony came out of the brush.

"You see I think of everything," her captor remarked. "You'll be much more comfortable on Bunny. You can ride, I suppose?"

"If you think—"

Penny's hand whipped out, the silver-mounted pistol in it. His was quicker. The slim brown fingers closed around her wrist. With the other hand, very gently, he took the weapon away from her. Holding it between forefinger and thumb, he regarded it solemnly.

"It *is* a pistol. Such a dangerous plaything for a lady! I'm surprised."

"You give that back, you coward."

"Why not?" To Penny's utter amazement, he bowed and handed it to her, then stepped back, his arms folded.

"Now shoot," he said pleasantly.

He didn't think she would. Wasn't he going to be surprised? The hammer clicked back. Her finger closed over the trigger.

The blue eyes, staring into hers, never wavered. "Raise your arm a little," he advised. "The way you're aiming, you're going to hit my knee."

She flung the pistol to the ground, caught back a bad word against her pretty teeth.

"Let it out," he said. "You'll feel better. And we don't mind here in the West."

Without waiting for the retorts choking to spill out, he continued, "You were wise not to kill me. You'd never have found your way to civilization. And there are men around here who might not remember that you are a proper little Southern lady."

The way he said it, it sounded as if he didn't think she was a lady. Of course, she hadn't been—scratching his face, flying into rages and pulling a pistol, to say nothing of almost swearing. Anyway, she didn't want to be one. That was the reason she'd been so glad when her uncle had sent for her to come West. She was sick and tired of being prim and proper.

"You're really much safer staying with me," her companion assured her thoughtfully.

Oddly enough, she knew she was. But she hated him, just the same. When he motioned her to the waiting horse, she stared up at him, temper again reddening her cheeks.

"If you think of everything, as you bragged a moment ago, why didn't you put a side-saddle on that pony? You don't expect me to ride astride, I hope."

The saddle was like his, silver-mounted with a queer high peak in the front.

"Sorry, but you're a Westerner now," he said. And with that, he picked her up and set her down on the thing.

The stirrups were the right length. How had he known how to adjust them? And he had known her name.

"What do you want of me?" This time she managed to make her voice polite.

He answered with equal courtesy. "I'll explain when we stop for supper. Something tells me we'd better be riding on—riding hard."

BEFORE long Penny was thankful enough to be seated securely, to have that horned peak in front of her. The trail stood on end half the time, and the rest it cork-screwed in and out between cliffs, sometimes scarcely wide enough for the horses to find footing. When she glanced to one side and saw a chasm reaching for her, Penny felt hollow in the pit of her stomach. She tried not to look down, but her eyes kept turning to it.

"Don't be frightened," her captor shouted over his shoulder. "Bunny's sure-footed."

Not for anything would she let him know the sick terror engulfing her. She swallowed. "When are we going to get some hard riding?" she called back.

"Soon now," he said, as if he were announcing good news.

The sick feeling grew. She fastened her eyes on the broad shoulders in front of her. He looked so steady, so sure—so *darned* sure. Tears blurred her vision. One slipped out and rolled down her cheek.

And she had wanted adventure! By now the stagecoach would be in Santa Fé. Her uncle would be scanning the passengers. Maybe they'd tell him she hadn't been on the coach at all. Suppose he never found out what had become of her?

But the bandit—if he was a bandit—had said he'd explain at supper. Then they were going to stop sometime. She put one hand up and cautiously brushed the tears away. She thought: "I must look terrible."

They came out just at sunset on a great flat place. Ledges of rock rose on three sides, stair-fashion. Beyond, higher peaks towered, blood red now in the setting sun.

Her companion pointed. "Sangre de Cristo. The Spaniards saw them first at sunset, when they came up from Mexico more than three centuries ago, and named them that! Blood of Christ."

Penelope shivered and closed her eyes, feeling suddenly small and lonely and afraid.

She was so lame and sore that she couldn't move. When her captor lifted her to the ground, her knees gave ignominously, and she had to catch his arm. She felt the strength in it, had an instant's mad desire to let herself sway forward against him, to put her head down on that broad shoulder.

His eyes were on her face. Just for a second, she glimpsed tenderness in them. He bent closer. She thought he was going to kiss her, and color swept into her cheeks.

Then he laughed mockingly, caught her elbows and began to march her up and down. You'd have thought she was a wooden doll, the way he acted. At home, men had fought for the chance to kiss her hand, for a favoring glance out of her gold-brown eyes.

As if he had read her thoughts, he said, "It wouldn't do, would it?"

"What wouldn't do?"

"I think you know." He watched the dark lashes sweep her cheek. "Let me warn you again. You're dealing with a different breed of men than you left back home. Don't flirt unless you mean it."

"I wasn't flirting." She bit her lips, felt tears of mortification spring into her eyes.

"BESIDES," he went on easily, "I'm supposed to deliver you safely to your uncle."

"To take me to Uncle Hat!" she gasped. "Then why didn't you say so?"

"Because you so obviously wanted adventure."

"Oh!" She flung herself away, faced him. "And I suppose that's why you wore a black mask."

"The mask?" He smiled. "It seemed wiser not to let the passengers know who I was. The driver knew. I had arranged the little affair with him."

Her mind flashed back; she heard the old man's chuckle: "Barring we don't run into trouble . . . ."

"But I don't see," she began.

He seemed to think the whole thing a joke. "You didn't act half as scared as you might have," he said teasingly.

"I didn't act scared at all," she retorted hotly. "I wasn't frightened."

"Oh, no!" His voice sobered. "I'm not sure it wouldn't be better for you, young lady, if you were."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that it doesn't pay to be too reckless out here."

What did he expect her to do, anyway, that he kept warning her? Uncle Hat must have been telling tales, she decided.

"Why didn't uncle meet me himself?" she demanded.

"A little matter of a gun wound kept him at the mine. Oh, he isn't hurt badly," he added, seeing the alarm in her face. "But he decided to be cautious, for once in his life. So he sent me. Lance Travis, at your service."

"And why, Mr. Lance Travis, couldn't you have met me in Santa Fé, like a gentleman?" she added.

"Well, you see I happened to know that a big bad wolf waited there to gobble up little red curls."

Wolf? She wished he'd talk sense. And then, unexpectedly he did.

"That's what he's called. Wolf Slade. He's the leader of a renegade band that's been in all sorts of deviltry around here. Just now they're after your uncle's silver mine."

"And they shot him?"

He nodded. "He didn't want to run you into danger, so we fixed it up for me to meet the stage outside of town."

"I suppose he suggested the play-acting?" she remarked scornfully.

"You'd be surprised," Lance answered cryptically. "He told me just how to deal with you. He even showed me that miniature he has of you."

The miniature did full justice to her red-gold curls and redder lips, her dark brown eyes. She wondered if he thought her pretty.

Again he read her thoughts. "The coloring seemed a mite high," he observed provokingly.

"Perhaps you prefer the Spanish type," she cried, wanting to kill him.

"Perhaps," he agreed coolly.

"I hear there are plenty in Santa Fé," she said. "Soon you can turn me over to my uncle and go back to them."

When he answered only with that teasing grin of his, she asked, "How long will it take us to reach the mine?"

"All tonight, hard riding."

"Not tonight." Weariness tore the protest out of her. "Can't we wait till morning?"

"So eager to stay in my company?"

"No, I'm not." She flung the words at him. "But I'm tired. I won't go on. You just try and make me."

"We can settle it later, after we eat," he said. "Suppose we call a truce now." He looked at her pocket and grinned tauntingly. "Let's promise not to shoot each other."

"You think I can't," she began hotly.

"On the contrary," he interrupted. "But suppose you put your surplus energy into gathering wood. In camp, everybody works, you know."

She supposed that if she didn't, he'd make her. He was quite capable of it!

HE MADE a very small fire, opened his saddlebag and took out some meat in strips, hard biscuits, a small tin pot for coffee.

"Not much of a banquet," he apologized.

"Why don't you shoot something?" she teased. "A good shot like you ought to be able to hit something."

He started to answer, changed his mind and said lightly, "You can't stand hardships, can you?"

After that, she would have eaten fried tree bark if he had offered it to her. He soaked the meat in the little stream that trickled down one of the ledges, then put it in a pan to fry. Water for the coffee came out of the same stream.

"And you can wash in it," he said. "Your face's dirty."

A moment before, hungrily smelling meat and coffee, she had forgotten how she hated him. Now she remembered. She'd get even before this trip was over.

Her chance came sooner than she expected . . . If only she could have foreseen how it was to work out!

As soon as they finished supper, he came back to the question of riding on—

"under the moon and the stars," he said. In spite of his air of joking, she knew he meant to do it.

He looked as if nothing would tire him. The small remnant of fire, flickering up, lighted the strong lines of his face, his gold skin and tawny hair. Lance was a good name for him—sabre-thin, strong, swift to strike. At the moment, mockery had left his blue eyes. They held a look she recognized.

Not for nothing was she a Southern belle. She knew what the firelight did to her. Her soft curls were the same red gold as the flames; her eyes the velvety dark of the night; her lips tempting. She moved closer, leaned her chin on one white hand.

"Let's be friends," she said softly. "I was furious, because you made me such a little idiot. But I'm sorry."

"Your uncle calls you Penny, doesn't he?"

"He started it years ago," she explained. "You know the old saying: Penny-wise, pound foolish."

"Of course. And you're pound foolish, every time, I reckon. Quick-tempered and reckless and spoiled." The smile took the sting out of the words. "You are spoiled, of course."

"Why?" she asked, hoping to tempt him into a compliment.

"And conceited, I see," he said. "Men usually do just what you want, don't they?"

"Mm," she agreed, softly. Her hand touched his arm. "And will you? Please, don't make me ride any more tonight."

"So that's it. I wondered why the sudden gentleness." His eyes were again mocking. "How far would you go to get your own way? A kiss, perhaps. No more, I'm sure, since you're a—"

He never finished. While her eyes held his, her hand had been creeping slowly toward his belt. Now she sprang to her feet, his gun in her hand.

"This is how far, Mr. Smartie, Now, we'll see who's boss. We're going to stay here. You can start making camp."

HE FLASHED to his feet. She wondered how angry he was, wondered with a little thrill of anticipation what he'd do to her.

She didn't mean to keep his gun, just to take him down a peg. He'd laugh at her, would he! She held the gun high over her head, blew him a kiss.

He started toward her, not hurrying, walking with a slow, purposeful stride.

"Hand me that gun, Penelope," he ordered in a voice so stern it made her quake.

But she didn't mean to give in so easily. Laughing still, she called, "Just try and make me," and clambered up on to the shelf of rock back of her. "Promise you won't ride on to the mine tonight."

Instead of answering, he stiffened, stopped dead in his tracks. While she watched, his face slowly whitened—with fury, she thought. Suddenly frightened and a little ashamed, she took a step toward him.

Raucous laughter burst out in back of her. A hand seized her wrist and twisted it. The gun fell to the ledge.

"You won't be riding to any mine tonight. Don't you worry, missie."

Lance was still standing on the ground below her. Never had she seen anyone so still, so taut. Only his eyes blazed, blue flame in his white face. They were looking past her. Very slowly, she turned her head. On the cliff behind her, she saw a row of men. One—two—five of them . . . and each held a gun in his hand.

There were six of them, counting the man who held her wrist in a vise-like grip. She could not see him, but she could see his arm, and the coarse black hairs crawling out from under the filthy cuff of his calico shirt, and the dirt caked on his knuckles, under his nails.

She could feel her flesh quivering. Her teeth were going to chatter. She thought wildly, "Don't let them see you're frightened. Talk. Say something—anything."

"Well, well, why didn't you bring the army?" she cried out. "Weren't you afraid, with so few men, you couldn't capture us. We *are* captured, I suppose?"

"Shut up, Penny," Lance said.

Close to her ear, the raucous voice bellowed, "Now, Mr. Travis, is that a nice way to talk to a lady. Such a pretty one, too!"

With that, he caught Penny round the waist and, leaping off the ledge with her in his arms, set her down in front of Lance.

"Did the little lady take your gun?" he taunted. "Ain't that too bad, to let a gal get the drop on you." His hand came down on Penny's shoulder, fingered the thin, soft silk of her dress. "Mebbe she'd like to trade you for a real he-man."

Still Lance didn't move. Only the cords of his throat stood out like knotted rope, and his hands, clenched, were white. Why did he take it? Why didn't he strike this ruffian, Penny wondered; and knew instantly. They'd shoot him, and she'd be left alone with them. As long as he stayed alive and uninjured, there was a chance.

But what sort of chance, she thought? Her eyes darted despairingly along the ring of guns, lifted to the brutal faces of the men holding them, came back to the one beside her.

He was half a head shorter than Lance, but powerful, with head thrust forward on heavy, hunched shoulders. The head itself was long and narrow, the jaw pointed, the eye slits under bushy brows. In the coming dark, they gleamed red, like an animal's. The fur cap he wore heightened the illusion.

Wolf, she remembered suddenly; and knew this was the leader of the band who had attacked her uncle. Wolf Slade! . . . Sick with despair, she realized the full extent of their danger.

The kidnapping hadn't been a dramatic gesture. Lance had feared something like this. That was why he had insisted on riding on tonight. If only he had told her! But, man-like, he had wanted to spare her anxiety, she supposed. And she, little fool, had played right into the enemy's hands.

If Lance had had his gun, she thought proudly, they'd never have been captured. How he must hate her! Her eyes turned pleadingly to his.

"Pound foolish again," she whispered.

"Sh!" He shook his head warningly, but his eyes were not angry. She read reassurance in their clear blue. "Be patient. We'll get out of this," they seemed to say.

She told herself that for once she would try and be wise. And she did not forget she still had her pistol.

ALREADY the place was a bustle of activity. One of the men built up the fire; another brought boughs and piled them on the ground; another blankets. They had taken Lance's knife, roped him and flung him onto the ground. Now Wolf lined his men up.

"You, Buck and Shorty," he growled, "take Jose and get on to the mine."

"How you want us to handle it, chief?" Buck asked.

Wolf thought for a moment. "When you get to Hatton's, one of you knock. He'll be at breakfast, likely. Tell him you've got a message from his niece. Call her Penny, intimate-like; then he'll think it's straight." His eyes leered at the girl who was straining forward tensely. "When he steps out, the other two cover him, then—"

Then what? Penny's heart thudded down.

Wolf's next words lifted a little. "Bring him here, see, and mind you don't mess him up any more."

"Why don't you let us just kill him, chief?" That was Buck again.

"Time enough for that," Wolf returned calmly. "First off, he's got to sign this paper, giving me—" he corrected himself quickly—"giving us the mine. I aim to have it legal, see. If we have the paper, and he ain't anywhere to be found, there ain't goin' to be anything them government friends of his can pin on us."

He laughed, and the others joined in. "Where's he goin' to be, Wolf?" one of them asked.

"Him and Travis here is goin' to get a personal escort into one of these here ravines. By the time anyone finds them, their bones won't look no different than a jack rabbit's."

"What about the gal?"

Wolf's pointed teeth closed down over his lower lip. "The gal's mine. Ain't any of you want to dispute that, is there?"

No one did.

Before he touched her, she'd kill herself. Penny saw the pistol pressed against her forehead, and a shiver ran through her. She looked at Lance, and remembered—they intended to kill him!

She felt strength flow into her. She had got Lance into this. She must get him out.

The three men had ridden off. That left only three—three against two. If only she could get her gun to him! And she'd need a knife, to cut his bindings. Instinctively, her hand moved toward the pocket in her skirt. Before her fingers touched the cold metal of the pistol, they came against the velvet of her sewing case. She thought of the scissors.

They would hide in the palm of his hand easily. If he had time enough to hack slowly, they would cut through the strands of the rope. But how was she to pass them to him?

WOLF had come back to the fire. He was watching her.

"How about a little good-night kiss?" he said. His eyes moved tauntingly to the trussed figure of Lance on the ground. "Got a ringside seat, ain't you, Travis? Same's we had, while you was holding up that there stagecoach. I sure admired the way you saved me the trouble of snatching the gal. I might have been tempted to shoot one of them white-livered Eastern skunks."

He stepped suddenly toward Penny. "How about it, sweetheart? A kiss, I said!"

She slipped out of reach, playing for time. "But where am I going to sleep?"

He pointed to the bough bed. "Sorry I couldn't bring along a featherbed, miss."

One of the men made a remark that brought a flush to Penny's cheeks. Lance was straining at his bonds.

"By tomorrow, I reckon the lass'll be ready for me," the leader said, with an evil leer.

His eyes rested avidly on the slim loveliness in front of him. Her curls were tangled. Fear had made her eyes wide and dark, her lips scarlet in the whiteness of her face. Reckless, little coquette that she was, men had often admired, even desired her, but none had ever looked at her with such indecent appraisal, with such lust.

Sick unto the very core of her being, she steeled herself to meet that gaze, not to betray her loathing.

"I don't mind sleeping on the ground," she said; and looked up at him through her lashes. "But can't we talk a while first?"

"That a girl," he reached out and caught at her.

"But this is so public," she pouted, springing back.

His eyes, suddenly wary, warned her he wasn't going to be easy to fool.

"But I don't mind, if you don't," she added quickly.

The scissors were in her palm. She flashed Lance a glance, found his eyes

staring at her with cold disdain. Stupid—didn't he know why she was doing this? She had to give him a clue to be ready.

"I guess you and I are going to get along fine, Wolf," she said. "Our captive here thought I was soft. He asked me if I carried a sewing kit."

That wasn't very clever, but a slight movement of Lance's fingers told her he understood. She moved until she stood in front of him, her wide skirts between him and the other men. Then slowly she started to sit down on the ground, making a great pretence of arranging her skirts, the one hand slipping back. Her eyes held Wolf's, calling him to her. She reached back as far as she dared. The scissors were on the ground now.

If she could keep the men's eyes on her, she could edge along and reach them. Wolf was all too eager to devote himself to her. Lunging forward in answer to her provocative glance, he threw himself down beside her, close, his body pressing hers. But his back was toward his prisoner. That was all that mattered.

Then she saw his two men wandering about, restlessly, and knew that unless she could hold their attention, as well, the whole plan would fail. Her mind racing desperately, frantically, caught at a chance.

Her soft hand touched Wolf's face. "I'll dance for you," she offered.

Before he could speak, she sprang to her feet and swung into a dance she had seen on the Plantations back home.

INSTINCT told Penny it was the only kind that would interest these men. Many a moonlight night, fascinated, she had watched black bodies swaying and writhing to the music of a guitar. More than once she had tried the dance herself, a little shame-facedly, in the secrecy of her room. But never had she dreamed she'd be doing it on a square of hard ground in front of a campfire.

Had Lance's fingers started to move?

Dance, Penny! For your life and his! Around and around in the firelight, she whirled . . . Twist your slim body, lift your skirt till the white, ruffled petticoats billow out—time enough later to feel shame! Dance now! Dance, and keep out of reach of these greedy hands . . . .

These men were easy to rouse. In and out, weaving, flashing, she went. Her breath was coming faster.

She felt herself growing weak, dizzy. She whispered a prayer: "Oh God, don't let me faint." And she fell.

As she hit the ground, her eyes opened with a desperate effort. The men had leaped forward to crouch over her, their faces so close she could feel their swift, hot breath scorching her cheeks.

Frantically she struggled up. And over their bent shoulders, she saw Lance, creeping forward.

Instantly the daze cleared. Her hand fluttered out, caught Wolf's. One arm slipped up around his neck. His hands closed on her, and the other men, obedient to his gesture, moved reluctantly back.

At that instant Lance sprang. His fist caught one man full in his surprised face. At the same instant Lance's legs flayed out at the other. And then, for horrible moments, Penny had her hands too full to see what was happening.

"You little hell-cat! You'll pay for this!"

Wolf, bellowing curses, fought to free himself from the encircling arms, arms no longer soft—but hard, choking. And those arms were not strong enough for the strength they were pitted against. He twisted loose, went for his gun.

Penny let go. As he reached for his gun, hers flashed. A tiny report, and flame licked out, thin and spiteful. Blood spurted out of his arm. Instantly he caught the gun in his other hand. She kicked his wrist, rolled clear and sprang to her feet. Before he could fire, she was on him, scratching, clawing, a wild-cat of fury.

But again his strength was too much for hers. He caught her flaying arms and flung her. As she fell, she heard his gun roar, saw Lance's body plunge past hers . . . .

THE sky here was so close, she thought. The stars were moving. Her eyes opened. There wasn't any stars. There was just Lance, leaning over her. Blood streamed from his face.

"Oh!" she gasped, and put up her hand.

His old grin came back. "Just a scratch. Not a circumstance to what we did to them, you and I. Are you all right?"

"Sure," she said, and sat up.

Men sprawled everywhere, it seemed to her. She located Wolf, his legs jutting off at queer angles from his body.

"I think he shot himself." Lance followed her gaze, his own a little grim. "Or maybe I did. I had to twist his arm a little."

"I shot him once," Penny boasted. He lifted her to her feet. "I was wondering about riding on," he murmured.

"Oh, no," she started to protest. And then, very meekly, she corrected herself: "Should we?"

"We could wait here, I suppose," he said. "Maybe that's better. They'll ride in, not suspecting a thing. We'll get the drop on them, easy."

"Sure," she agreed, but her lips quivered.

His hands loosed her. "Wait till I wash my face."

She followed him to the stream, her spirits recovered enough to tease him a little. "Can't you shoot with a dirty face?"

"I wasn't thinking of shooting." He flashed up so suddenly she caught her breath and backed away.

"Why were you so mean to me at first?" It was all she could think of to say.

"Was I mean?" he parried. And then, "Perhaps I thought it would be an agreeable change for you. I had an idea you were pretty well used to having men let you walk over them."

"So you thought you'd tame me!" she returned, with a flash of her old spirit.

"And did I?" he asked. "Are you tamed?"

She made a curtsy. "Your servant, sir."

"No," he said. "My girl. You see I knew you were my girl the first glimpse I had of that picture of you."

She had retreated as far as she could go. Her hands came out. He caught them and laced them around his neck, bent swiftly.

"You are my girl—aren't you, Penny?"

How could she answer?

After a moment he did hold her a little away, teasing again: "If you were a proper young lady, you wouldn't let me kiss you."

"I never pretended to be proper," she murmured, her lips shamelessly lifting again to his. "Just wise."

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COWGIRLS

"No! No, I won't!" she cried. . . . They were all on their feet, but it was not at her they stared.

CHAPTER ONE

Cow-Nurse for a Hell-Cat

MONTY DREW slid four bits across the Last Chance bar to pay for his drink. His lips opened to ask the way to Orrin Kenyon's ranch.

There came a clatter of short, quick steps across the sidewalk outside. The swing doors slatted open. A girl with a gun in her fist came in. Simultaneously the bartender vanished behind his mahogany barrier.

She was of medium height, black-haired, with the snapping black eyes and high color that often go with a quick temper. Her worn sombrero slanted rakishly. She was clad in a red flannel shirt and faded blue overalls, stuffed into Spanish boots. There was a patch across

CAN'T BE BOSSED

A stirring, human novelette of rebellious cattleland sweethearts

By Jack Bechdolt

A proud, imperious, cattleland princess, a spoiled, hard-riding little hell-cat who knew no law but the wild promptings of her own heart —that was Madge Kenyon. . . . Then her grandfather sent a new boss to watch over the ranch, and over her. And she rebelled, for the last time—against the bittersweet command of lips she thought should be giving her kisses instead of orders!

the rear of her overalls in a very conspicuous place, and the effect would have been comic if the girl hadn't looked so mad.

"Anybody that reaches for a gun is going to get hurt," she announced in a carrying voice. "I came here to talk business with Short Card Harris. The rest of you take it easy and stay out of this."

Besides Drew and the bartender, there were three other men playing stud at a rear table. The man who had been dealing rose from his chair.

"Now, Miss Kenyon—" he began.

Drew's eyes lighted. So this was Madge Kenyon, old Orrin Kenyon's

granddaughter and heiress to thousands of cattle and miles of rangeland.

"Don't you, 'Now Miss Kenyon' me, Harris," she was saying. "How about Lanky Higgins?"

She didn't give Harris time to answer that. She went on heatedly, "I told you last week that Lanky was not to sit in your poker game. I told you that when he got his pay check he was supposed to send it to his sister in Oklahoma because she's sick and needs the money." She paused dramatically. "Did I tell you that?"

Harris swallowed nervously and sweated.

"Lanky lost sixty-eight dollars in your game last night," she went on in tones of venom. "Now you're going to hand that money over to me so he can send it home, where it belongs."

THEY stared at each other, the bulky tinhorn and the angry young woman. Drew stared at them both, like a spectator at a play.

In the measure of feet, inches and pounds there certainly was not much of Madge Kenyon, but she seemed to dominate the Last Chance! It was that spirit inside her, the same spirit that had made the Kenyons the bosses of these southwestern ranges for fifty years past.

Harris answered, with the dignity of injured innocence, "How was I to know Lanky had a sick sister? I can't keep track of every fool rider you hire on your place. He can have his money back." He added with sudden spite, "I'm doing this on my own hook and not because I'm taking orders from you. Maybe your grandfather owns most of the good range and about all the money around here, but it don't make you boss of this county. We still got a democratic form of government, I guess. Yes, and some folks that think their money entitles 'em to act like royalty will find that out to their sorrow some day." He gave her a knowing look.

"I'll take the money. You can keep the talk," she told him.

"It's in the safe," Harris said, a sudden gleam in his eyes. "Come into my office, Miss Kenyon." He stepped across to the little partitioned coop where the safe was kept. At the door he stood aside. "Ladies first," he said politely.

Drew touched the girl on the arm. He had followed the two of them to the office.

He shook his head at her. "Let Mr. Harris do it, Miss Kenyon. He doesn't need you in there to open a safe." His voice sank to a whisper. "The bartender slid out the front way. I think he's gone to bring the town marshal."

"And he meant to trap me in there!" She turned to the scowling Harris. "You get that money out, and get it pronto!"

Harris realized that action was required. Under her watchful gaze, he opened the safe and counted some bills into her hand.

"I can have the law on you for this," he began.

Drew interrupted. "I hear somebody running down the street. We go out this way."

He shoved her toward a rear door as he said it. They dodged through a little alley and across a vacant lot.

"Where's your horse?" he asked.

"Hitched in front of the Last Chance."

"So is mine. You wait."

He left her at a run. When he returned he had both horses.

"The marshal had got there," he reported. "Harris is threatening to get a warrant for you on a charge of disturbing the peace and carrying concealed weapons."

They looked at each other. Madge laughed.

"He can make trouble if he catches you," Drew said. "We'd better light out."

SAFELY outside the town, she pulled her horse to a walk and began to appraise her companion. He was one of those quiet, sandy-haired, blue-eyed, lean-faced men who could fade into any background, but had to be counted in any reckoning. She approvingly noted his firm jaw and square shoulders. She wondered what he was thinking of her, a girl in red flannel shirt and patched pants who held up a gambler with a gun!

It was not often that she wondered—or cared—what people thought of her. Orrin Kenyon owned enough land to make a sizable kingdom. He ruled it like a king, with Madge his crown princess. Her parents had died when she was a baby. She was the last of the Kenyons, heiress to all of old Orrin's holdings, lock, stock and barrel. The Kenyons were a law unto themselves and seldom bothered to wonder what others thought of them.

Madge Kenyon smiled as she reined in her horse. She liked the looks of this stranger.

"I didn't have time to get your name."

Drew told her. "I was looking for the Kenyon ranch and you. I have a letter from your grandfather."

Her grimace was involuntary. She regarded him with a new interest, a more guarded alertness.

"I'm not sure that I like that. My grandfather seldom writes to me unless he thinks I've been disgracing the family again." Her smile became mischievous. "I hear from him quite often."

She examined the outside of the letter dubiously. "He's still in 'Frisco on that business?"

"He's sailing to the Argentine. I think you'd better read his letter."

She ripped open the envelope, but before she started to read, she paused to state, "My grandfather is stubborn as a mule, and just as often mistaken in his ideas, in case you don't know it. He tries to run me, just like he ran my father and my mother—just like he's been running everything in this county for the last fifty years."

She lifted her chin, her cheeks bright with color. "It just happens I have my own ideas about how to run my life," she said and began the letter:

> My dear granddaughter:
>
> I have instructed the bank at Haleyville to cover your recent overdraft. Also to add sufficient to your account to take proper care of your incidental expenses for several months to come, because I shall be obliged to make that journey to the Argentine. A fine thing for a man of my time of life, to go traipsing off around the world.
>
> Also I have instructed my lawyer to settle the damage suit brought by that Mexican, Gonzales, on account of your horsewhipping him for mistreating a burro. Next time take an old man's advice and either buy the burro or shoot the Mex. It's a lot cheaper.

Thus far Madge's brow had been serene and her heart at ease. There was nothing in the letter to cause her uneasiness. But as she read on, a frown began

> I see by the last copy of the Haleyville Times that that young pup Stuart bought the old Whitstone ranch and will be our neighbor. I was hoping that wouldn't happen. I don't know much about this Stuart, but I know one thing for sure—I don't trust him anywhere near my granddaughter.

Madge uttered a sound of suppressed rage. When he had started on this business trip, Orrin had forbidden her to see any more of Jack Stuart. So, naturally, she had been seeing him on numerous occasions. He was a stranger, investing in neighboring property. He was a gentleman, and handsome and attractive. She was no longer a child. She would choose her own friends—yes, and fight and die for her right to choose them, without anyone else's help.

The letter went on:

I'm sorry to say I can't stop Stuart from settling in the neighborhood if he takes a notion to. What with the nincompoops we have making new laws and enforcing them a man isn't allowed any liberty of action any more. But if I can't stop him from being a neighbor, anyway I can look after my granddaughter's welfare. . . .

Here she gave a low cry. She turned to Drew, her cheeks flaming. "He didn't! Not even my own grandfather would dare write this!"

"I assure you he did. I watched him write it."

"Do you know what it says, here? Do you mean to tell me you have the impudence to bring me this letter, knowing what's in it? Listen!"

She read aloud: "The bearer of this letter is Monty Drew. I am sending him to the ranch to take charge of all my affairs, including you. Until my return, you will consider that Monty Drew is the boss. He has my instructions to keep you from making a fool of yourself, and particularly to keep you from making a fool of yourself by marrying this young upstart Jack Stuart."

A boss—a new boss, hired by her grandfather as he would hire any cowhand, and sent express from 'Frisco to run her affairs as if she were a child . . . or an imbecile!

MADGE glared at Drew, her cheeks flushed in anger. Monty Drew thought she was the prettiest girl he had ever seen, even though she was snapping his head off.

"And you actually accepted this crackbrained job?"

"I did."

"Then you must have needed a job mighty bad, Mr. Monty Drew!"

He flushed at that. "It happens I didn't need a job at all, Miss Kenyon. But your grandfather once did me a big favor—the kind of favor a man can't forget. He—well, he practically forced me to take this job. I'd have been an ungrateful yellow dog if I had refused."

"And you think you're going to run the ranch—and run me!"

Looking into her indignant face, he began to have secret doubts. Orrin Kenyon had warned him it would be a tough job—then practically forced him to accept it. He had to do the best he could, because he was no shirker.

He spoke diplomatically. "I don't want to run you, as you put it. I hope to . . . advise you, perhaps."

"About whom I can marry?"

"No, only about this Stuart. Your grandfather doesn't trust Stuart. His directions were very pointed about him. He must have some strange intuition about the man."

Madge's smile grew poisonously bright. "It's mighty sweet of both of you to take so much interest in my affairs. Now let me tell you, I am already engaged to marry Mr. Jack Stuart."

This was not strictly true. Stuart had asked her to marry him on several occasions. She liked the man. His good looks and charm attracted her. But she had not reached the point of promising him her heart, not until this minute. Now, confronted with a situation that was both ridiculous and infuriating to a high spirited girl, she felt that her mind was made up.

"I'm going to marry him," she repeated. "And what are you going to do about it?"

Drew returned her defiant look without any show of agitation. "I'm going to see that you don't marry him," he answered simply. "That's what I promised your grandfather. . . . But let's be as good friends as we can, under the circumstances," he added with a smile.

When he smiled, she saw that he was really some years younger than he had at first seemed . . . and quite a lot better looking, too.

"By all means, let's be friends," she re-

turned, with more than a hint of sarcasm. "We ought to be wonderful friends . . . just like cat and dog."

CHAPTER TWO

Moonlight Kiss—Peace Offering

THE remainder of their ride to Kenyon's passed in silence. Inwardly, Madge boiled. Her eyes held the contemplative gleam of a bad horse that is on the point of turning all hell loose.

Drew watched her, his outward appearance giving no indication of tensed nerves and apprehensive thoughts.

"Especially when she's gentle, look out for her," Orrin Kenyon had warned him. "She can think of enough deviltry in five minutes to keep Satan busy for a year."

Her first act was to present Drew to Budge Fisher, Orrin's foreman, who had been running Kenyon's ranch for twenty-five years. It was a responsible job, and he was jealous of his authority.

"Shake hands with Mr. Drew, Budge," she smiled. "Orrin sent him here from 'Frisco to be our new boss."

"Monty Drew?" old Budge exclaimed, his big paw crunching Drew's hand. "I'm damn proud to know yuh. If you're takin' hold here, I'll be mighty glad to work under yuh."

Later Budge confided to her, "This Drew is just a young squirt, but he had all the handling of the biggest horse ranch in Southern California. He would of been pretty near a millionaire by now, only a crooked partner ran away with all the money and left him holding the sack. Orrin got a bargain in him all right."

"All right, if you don't mind his bossing your affairs and telling you how to run your business, I don't," Madge sniffed. "But I'll tell you one thing, he's not going to tell me where to head in."

Thoughtfully, she retired to her own room and closed the door. If Drew had seen her then, he would have been more apprehensive than ever, for she remained extremely quiet and in deep thought for several hours.

When she appeared, to sit at the head of old Orrin's dining table that evening, he did not at first know her. The patched overalls and red flannel shirt and Spanish boots had disappeared. A slender figure in a simple white frock drifted into the room, eyes modestly cast down. She looked very young and very innocent, and the smile she offered him was the trusting smile of a child.

While the new boss of Kenyon's sat with his coffee, she excused herself to go into the big living room. In a moment Drew was startled and charmed by the soft chords of a piano. He finished his coffee and went into the next room. The mellow light of candles showed him the rapt, flushed face of the girl, absorbed in her melodies.

Her hair had been pulled into a simple knot, and the soft shadow of its wave made her features fragile and lovely. Her performance on the yellowed ivory keys was not brilliant playing, but it perfectly suited the colorful old room and its memories of a long, vigorous past.

FOR several minutes she seemed unaware of his presence. When her eyes rose finally, they were not unfriendly. She nodded at an easy chair nearby.

"This piano belonged to my grandmother," she said. "Orrin gave it to her the year her first baby was born in this house. He had it freighted all the way from New Orleans, and they had to fight Apaches to get it here."

Her eyes indicated an oil painting about the rough stone hearth. A seven-branched silver candelabra held its offering of light beneath it.

"That's my grandmother. It was painted in St Louis before she and Orrin started West. Some people are kind enough to think I look a little like her. She was a famous beauty."

She seemed confused by this impulsive revelation. Her head drooped, she let her fingers wander into old tunes, *Robin Adair, Juanita, My Old Kentucky Home.*

"But maybe I'm boring you?" she suggested after a time. "I play pretty badly, I'm afraid. Orrin loves music, so! I don't suppose you have reason to believe it, but my grandfather and I don't spend all our time fighting."

"Your grandfather worships the ground you walk on," he answered. "I don't wonder."

She turned to him impulsively, her bright eyes like the candid ones of a child. "I'm afraid I was rude to you this morning. I didn't make you feel very welcome here. But you are welcome! Budge has been singing your praises to me. The riders fairly worship you. . . . It seems you're a famous person."

He looked uneasy but pleased. He was thinking of Orrin's warning. . . .

"I was pretty mad at you, at first," Madge went on, her cheeks becomingly flushed. "I suppose I'm just a spoiled brat. But I want to make up for it. Would you—would you mind if I gave a party soon and invited some of the neighbors in to meet the new boss of Kenyon's? I love parties, don't you?" She added with breathless haste, "Of course, you know best. If you think it wouldn't be advisable—"

"Give the party, by all means," Drew agreed. "I hope you don't think I want to spoil your fun. I don't want to do anything that would interfere with you. I didn't ask for this job. I didn't want to take it. If you've really forgiven me for taking it, please go ahead and do whatever you like."

"Then," said Madge, smiling, "I really have forgiven you. I'm going to give that party. And—and let's be friends."

He held the small hand she offered him longer than politeness indicated. He seemed to have some difficulty in releasing it.

"We are friends," he agreed, and the fervor in his words showed plainly that he regarded this as almost too good to be true.

In the privacy of her room, with the memory of his, "Good night," fresh with her, she looked at the smiling girl in the mirror and winked one eye heavily. She had impressed Drew, all right. He'd soon be eating out of her hand.

At the same time Drew, half undressed, paused to make a cigarette. He was thinking of what Orrin had said, "Look out for her when she acts gentle!" He felt distinctly worried.

MADGE remained docile during the week that intervened between Drew's arrival and his formal welcome to Kenyon's. He saw no more of the old red shirt and the overalls with the patch behind. She wore her prettiest frocks and she consulted him in all her planning.

"Would it be all right to invite Mr. Stuart?" she inquired one day. "He's our nearest neighbor, you know. It would be awkward if he was pointedly left out."

She gave Drew a glance that was just a little too innocent. He checked an impulse to laugh as he agreed.

"Then I'll ride right over and leave my invitation. You're sure it's quite all right?"

"I'll be responsible to your grandfather," he said gravely.

His feeling that all hell was about to break loose was becoming a conviction. But better to have it break loose under Orrin Kenyon's roof where he could keep track of it.

Guests rode or drove from twenty-five miles away to enjoy the hospitality of Kenyon's. The fine old living room seemed to smile with a stately politeness. Saddles, rifles, whips, boots, spurs and

bridles that usually cluttered the corners had been cleared away. The furniture of rosewood and mahogany that Madge's grandmother had brought from St. Louis shone with fresh polish. Candles in the fine silver holders had taken the place of the usual swinging oil lamps. A fire crackled in the great hearth, for the night was sharp. Ranchers and hired hands mingled in a medley of formal frock coats and loudly patterned flannel shirts and fancy chaps. Among them, Jack Stuart loomed tall and conspicuous, dancing every number he could get with Madge.

Drew's eyes seldom left them. They made a handsome pair, Madge and this big, black-haired stranger with the romantic, dark eyes, who had bought the old Whitstone ranch. He had bought it to raise cattle, he said, but so far there were no cattle on his range. There were a dozen men living in the old ranch-house, all strangers in the county. Stuart said they were his riders and that presently they would drive a big herd up from Mexico. Meantime, his chief interest in life was Madge Kenyon. That was plain to anybody who watched those two.

During a pause in the music, Madge stood on the stair, looking over the scene below. She was proud of the success of her party, and prouder still because she had heard a white-haired woman remark, "Blessed if she don't look the dead spit of her grandma, in that lovely yaller dress. She's a throw-back, if ever there was one. And Sue Kenyon sure was the prettiest girl west of the Missouri."

Madge knew she was lovely in that dress! She had bought it specially for this occasion. And tonight, for reasons that were obscure, she felt more excited and happier than she ever remembered feeling. But she missed Monty Drew! Somehow, it seemed his presence was needed to make her happiness complete.

She saw him slipping quietly out of the room—and followed him outside.

The moon blazed in silver glory against a sky of royal blue. It showed her Drew, who was walking slowly away from the house. Madge followed him, her heart beating rapidly.

HE paused presently, stared at the moon and began to roll a cigarette, unaware that he was being followed. He looked sober, a little lonesome, away from the gaiety and staring at the moon. She slipped her hand through his arm—and that was his first intimation of her nearness.

"You haven't danced with me tonight," she began reproachfully. "You danced with all the other girls!"

There was a gleam of emotion in his blue eyes, almost a startling gleam. Then it was gone, and his smile was friendly, but calm.

"You seemed to be pretty much taken up with Stuart."

"You don't approve of Stuart?" She stood a little on tiptoe, staring into his face, her smile teasing him. "Remember what Grandfather said about him in his letter? Remember your job!"

His smile broadened. "You're trying to start an argument. We ought to sign a truce while your party lasts."

"Jack Stuart is handsome," she declared with fervor. "He's the handsomest man I ever knew . . . I think. He certainly knows how to make a girl feel that she's wonderful. You don't ever tell a girl she's wonderful, do you?"

"Some girls don't need to be told, Madge."

"Oh! So I'm conceited, am I? Conceited as well as headstrong, wild, imbecilic and a born damn fool! Thank you so much!"

Two hands sought suddenly at her shoulders, and the surprise of it wiped the mock indignation from her face. She felt helpless under that grip. She was trembling.

"Wonderful?" Drew's voice was low and breathless. "You're wonderful, all right! But that's not the word! You're adorable! The prettiest, sweetest, most adorable little maverick that ever ran wild on a range! There's only one answer to give a girl like you, and that's to kiss her within an inch of her life. And that's exactly what you came out here asking for, isn't it? Isn't it!"

His compelling hands shook her gently, impatiently. They seemed to demand an answer, and she answered by her silence, her eyes downcast, afraid to meet his look. Her face was white, with an emotion that frightened her; her whole being limp, waiting for the kiss he threatened.

She had trapped herself!

Beginning in a spirit of mischief, intent only on twisting him about her finger, she had waked in her own heart an emotion stronger than anything she had ever dreamed of. It left her helpless before him, the conquered and not the conquering. And wildly, proudly happy in her new humility! She loved him! He loved her! Now he would kiss her!

Drew did nothing of the sort.

The grasp of his hands relaxed. She was free. His face looked rather white and drawn, but his voice was steady in its smooth, almost mocking indifference.

"I forgot my job," he said. "I couldn't very well take a proper, detached interest in your behavior if I kept on like that. You knew it, didn't you? That was very clever."

She gave him a frightened look. Her cheeks began to burn.

"You run back to your party and try to behave yourself, Madge. And don't let me catch you trying tricks like that on Stuart. Your grandfather's right—you need a lot of looking after."

Her face flamed. Her whole body blazed with a rage that left her speechless. This was worse than rudeness. This was deliberate insult, for in that brief, tense moment when his hands had held her, she had given him all of her love and loyalty.

Her hand lashed across his face, waking a sharp little echo as it struck the dark skin. She struck with all her force, hard enough to jerk his head aside. They stood dumb and starting then, and she saw that her blow left the curious, white imprint of her fingers on his cheek.

She turned and ran away into the darkness, leaving him motionless under the gleaming desert moon.

CHAPTER THREE

Vengeance Bride

AT midnight the dancing ceased. Long tables were ranged down the big room, and the guests sat down to a supper.

At the head of the board Madge presided, a regal little figure in her gleaming gown of yellow silk, cut with a long train such as her grandmother had worn when Sue Kenyon was famous as the prettiest, most high-spirited girl west of the Missouri.

The natural color had been missing from Madge's cheeks since that moment in the moonlight when her hand had struck Drew's cheek, but the rouge of her dressing table flamed there. She had gone back to her guests soon after that episode, and Drew had watched her, the gayest of them all, dancing often with Stuart and whispering much with him.

At supper Stuart loomed dark and suave at her right hand. Drew had been summoned to the place at her left. When she rose from her chair, holding aloft a glass of wine, the lively clamor about the tables grew still. Young as she was, there was a poise about the heiress to Kenyon's that made her a very royal hostess.

"Just like her grandma," whispered the white-haired woman who had noted that resemblance. "Oh, she certainly was a

wildcat all right, that Sue Kenyon!"

Madge's eyes swept the attentive faces—faces of old family friends and neighbors and the riders who had been her pals since childhood. Among these latter were Budge Fisher and Lanky, whose financial affairs she had managed with such a high hand. Emotion blurred their encouraging grins as she hesitated.

"I'm glad you came to my party tonight," she began, with a sudden, dazzling smile. "I'm particularly glad, because it's the last party I'll ever give here. It's the last night I shall ever spend at Kenyon's."

Her glance turned to the dark, handsome face on her right and dwelt there for a moment, as if she must reassure herself this was reality. Then she looked at Drew, and the smile grew more brilliant. Her eyes were shining like dangerous blades.

"In fact, this is my goodbye to Kenyon's," she went on clearly to the startled, quiet little crowd. "I'm beginning a new life tomorrow, and I'm asking you all to wish me happiness in it. Tomorrow I—I . . ." She turned to the dark man at her right. "You tell them," she faltered.

Stuart was on his feet instantly, his white teeth gleaming under the crisp, black mustache, his dark face and dark eyes glowing with triumph.

"Miss Kenyon has done me the honor of promising to be my wife," he said smoothly. "We plan to be married tomorrow."

In the stunned silence, Madge's echo came clearly. "Yes, we plan to be married tomorrow."

But it was not to Stuart that she turned then. She turned toward Drew and smiled into his shocked graying face.

"Tomorrow!" she repeated, and her voice rose hysterically.

Her hand snapped the stem of her wine glass. She turned and ran from the room, up the stair and out of sight of them all.

THE dawn was in the East, when there came a knock at her bedroom door and Drew's voice called her name. She had expected that, had been prepared for it for several hours past. Well, she was not afraid of him, not afraid of any anger he might show because of her public insult. She was not a child, to be bullied by any man—and she had Jack Stuart's love and support!

But she blinked with surprise to find Stuart beside Drew at her door. Drew, who looked tired, but threateningly collected and firm, explained.

"I asked Mr. Stuart to wait for this interview. We three have got to have a clear understanding, and I had to get rid of your guests and look after a lot of things before I could get around to it."

"I think we understand each other perfectly," Madge said, a small, pale figure of dignity. "I'm going to marry Mr. Stuart—and that's the end of it."

"That's the end of it, Drew," Stuart chimed in. "Madge is of age. She can do as she pleases. And she pleases to marry me rather than be bullied by her grandfather's hired man. Will you come away with me now, darling?"

"No, she won't," Drew said before she could answer. The calm finality of it made her gasp with new anger. "She won't come now, or any other time, because so long as I'm on this job, I won't let her. You can talk all you like about her being of age and her own boss and free, white and American, but her grandfather hired me to keep her from marrying you. I'm going to do it. And if she was my own daughter I'd feel the same way about her marrying you."

Stuart flushed under the steady, contemptuous glance of those cold blue eyes. "You'd better say what you mean by that, Drew."

"I'm going to. I've been making quite a study of you and your affairs since I heard about you from Orrin Kenyon. It

was my job to find out all about you."

"You're insinuating that there's something crooked about me," Stuart exclaimed. "You think you've got something on me, do you?"

"You're jumping to conclusions. Maybe you have reason to." Drew's smile was cold. "Come to think of it, there is something queer about a man who buys a ranch close to the Mexican line and stocks it, not with cattle, but with as hard-faced a collection of gun-rats as I ever set eyes on. That's what first started me asking questions through the Federal Secret Service."

In spite of bulk and bluff, Stuart started at this hint. "Come out with it," he blustered. "What sort of crime are you accusing me of?"

"I'm not accusing you—yet. But I'm finding out what I can."

"If you think you're going to scarce me out, you've got another guess coming! I'm going to marry Madge. If you get in my way, you'll get hurt. Madge, are you coming with me?"

"She is not," Drew said, with a new note in his quiet voice, a softly menacing note. "And don't try to reach that gun you're packing under your arm. Madge isn't leaving this ranch without me, just now. There are half a dozen Kenyon riders waiting downstairs to blow you everlastingly full of holes even if I couldn't."

"Stop it, both of you!" Madge's voice cut in. "This isn't any bar-room fight, that you're going to settle with guns!" She turned to Drew, her voice sharp with rage. "You'll take me to see our family lawyer in Haleyville tomorrow morning, do you understand? I demand to see him, and you don't dare keep me from him!"

He nodded. "Talk it over with your lawyer, by all means. I'm not trying to keep you from him, so long as you understand I ride to Haleyville with you."

She gave him a contemptuous nod and turned to Stuart. "Good night, darling. And don't worry. I'm going to marry you tomorrow, exactly as I said. And now, both of you can get out of here. I'm going to bed."

As she closed the door upon them it was Stuart's eye she caught. Between them passed a secret look of perfect understanding. Anticipating what would happen, Madge had made her plan with him before she had flaunted her promise of marriage in front of the man who had roused her royal rage.

THAT rage was the one emotion in Madge when she rode with Drew toward Haleyville in the morning. It gave her one purpose, to outwit and humiliate this man. Just to triumph over Drew, that was all she asked. . . .

From time to time, she glanced at him. And, thinking of her plans, she enjoyed a smile of anticipation. As they neared the first scattered houses of the town, she spoke with deceptive mildness.

"Will you do something for me?"

"If it's anything I can do!" He gave her a surprised look.

"The whole town will be talking about me this morning. I can't stand their staring and whispering and grinning. Could we—could we get Orrin's lawyer to come over to the hotel, where I could talk to him privately?"

Drew nodded. "I'll fix that," he promised.

They rode directly to the hotel and hurried in. "I'll take a room for you," he explained. "You can wait there for the lawyer."

Drew ushered her into a quiet room at the rear of the second floor. "I'm going to leave you here while I find that lawyer." He hesitated. "Madge, I've got to ask for your promise not to leave here or make any attempt to find Stuart."

Sudden color stained her face. "I won't give you that promise. I don't recognize any right of yours to ask for it."

He shook his head, regretfully. "I was afraid of that. Well, I promised to find your lawyer, and I'm going to keep my promise. But I'll have to lock you in, if you won't give me your word—"

"Do what you like, I'm not promising anything."

The sullen embers of rage had flared up again. He looked as if he would have liked to box her ears. Then he walked to the room's one window, and glanced out. Between window sill and ground was a long drop, more than any girl in her senses would risk.

Reading his thoughts, her smile taunted him.

"I'm locking the door and taking the key with me," he announced. "Also, in case you did get any foolish notions, I'm taking your horse to the livery stable. I'll leave word there that nobody gets that horse except with my permission. Is that clear?"

She saw how her smile and her taunting silence infuriated him, and she was glad. Let him rage!

At the door he paused once more, turning toward her with a simple earnestness that put her instantly on guard.

"You hate me, don't you?"

She was silent.

"That's not fair, is it? You know I didn't ask for this job. You know I can't let you marry Stuart without double-crossing old Orrin, who loves you. And besides, you haven't any business marrying Stuart. I've got reason to believe he's crooked. He won't make you happy—"

"Oh, stop it!" Her voice was harsh and there was a certain amount of bitterness in it. "Do you think I'm going to listen to all that over again? Go ahead and get your job done. It's what you're paid for."

He looked then as he had the night before, when her hand struck him. Without any more words, he closed the door between them and locked it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cattle Princess in Jail

DREW'S steps scarcely had died away along the uncarpeted corridor of Haleyville's hotel before Madge raised the room's one window. For Drew to impound her horse and find the lawyer would take the better part of a half hour. That was time enough.

She recoiled after her first view over the sill. The ground fell away at the rear of the building. The drop was worse than she had expected. Well, she had to leave that to luck. Also, she would have to find a horse. That, too, had to be left to luck!

She struck the hard clay of the hotel yard with a violence that half-stunned her. Her small body, accustomed to taking plenty of bad tosses from fractious broncs, rolled down the slope and bumped into a rock. For several minutes she had no desire to stir.

Then she was up and hobbling off before anybody noticed her unconventional exit. A horse, next! It must be a likely, fresh horse, because she had to ride to Jackson, fifteen miles away—and she had to get there in a hurry.

There was a hitching rack at the rear of the Haleyville Bank. It was pretty well filled this morning. She made a wise choice, untied the beast and was off, choosing the town's back streets. The whole business had not taken ten minutes.

Soon she ceased to worry about pursuit. The stolen horse was streaking over a sandy, bare plain, and there was no sign of any rider spurring after her from Haleyville. The wind was in her face. She was free. She was triumphing over Monty Drew!

It was a shock, when she checked her horse before the little county courthouse and jail at Jackson, to see Stuart running to greet her. She had almost forgotten, in

her excitement, the waiting bridegroom!

Stuart's arms caught her as she slid from the saddle. He held her close and kissed her. He had kissed her before, kissed her ecstatically just last night, when she had hurriedly agreed to a runaway wedding, but this noonday kiss came as a shock. It left her frightened, staring at him as if he were a stranger.

"You darling!" Stuart laughed. "Come along to the courthouse. We'll get that license in no time. I've got the preacher and the church picked out and waiting."

She blinked at him wonderingly. He was big and handsome and suave. He had an assured way with women that had intrigued her and thrilled her yesterday. . . . But that was yesterday, before she had given that promise. Now she was about to marry him, to pledge herself to follow him in sickness and in health, as long as she lived.

A little way off, a group of men watched their meeting with grins. She recognized several of the hard-faced strangers Stuart had imported to the Whitstone ranch. As Stuart took her arm and led her toward the courthouse, the men followed, as if she was a prisoner.

"Why in the world did you bring that crew?" she whispered.

He laughed. "Wedding guests, my dear! Good old faithful retainers. And, anyway, I had to change our plans a bit. I'm riding to Mexico with the boys. We're spending our honeymoon below the line."

"You're taking me to Mexico! But I don't want to go to Mexico!"

Something unfathomable and frightening showed a moment in his dark eyes before he laughed down at her. "But we're going to Mexico, my dear! I have to—and a wife's place is with her husband." He pressed her arm reassuringly and whispered, "You don't think for a minute that I'd be separated from you now!"

THE hour and a half that followed was a muddle of small, irrelevant facts that meant no more than the jumble of events in a bad dream.

There was an unshaved county clerk, who asked her absurd questions and filled in a printed form. There were curious, staring faces at the county seat hotel, where she and Stuart had lunch together, always with his silent, hard-faced crew of riders near at hand. There was a hot and dusty walk up a hill to the little board church that baked in the blazed southwestern daylight.

And then she was standing with Stuart before an altar. And a mousey, timorous little black-coated man opened a book and read haltingly, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God and man. . . ."

That was the marriage service! Her marriage . . . to a stranger! He was no more than that, now—a frightening stranger whose firm hand held her arm while his crew of silent, shifty-eyed men watched from the pews.

She snatched her arm from under Stuart's hand. She turned from the altar, crying, "No! no, I won't—"

They were all on their feet, but it was not at her that they stared. Two men had burst into the church, and one of them wore the metal badge of a deputy sheriff. The other was Monty Drew.

Then she was halfway down the aisle, with the feeling that she was running in a nightmare. The deputy's hand checked her.

"You're Madge Kenyon? Well, I'm mighty sorry to interrupt, Parson. Seems a real shame. But I've got a warrant for this little lady, and the wedding can't go on. Miss Kenyon, you're under arrest on a charge of horse stealing."

DOORS of steel closed with a clang. The heiress of Kenyon's, old Orrin's princess royal, was in jail, charged with

stealing a horse. In that afternoon of heat, excitement and inward terror, this mad climax did not seem dreadful to Madge. Instead, the clang of jail doors came as heartening music. At least, she was not marrying Jack Stuart!

Her terror of him had grown since he had met and kissed her in front of the little courthouse. Something in his look and voice, when he told her they were riding to Mexico; something in the constant presence of those hard-bitten riders of his; all sorts of little things that her sharpened wits noticed and overwrought nerves felt about him, heightened her fears. And but for Monty Drew, she would have been his wife before now, trapped by her own folly! Drew had got her into jail—and she loved him for it.

The county jail had one cell reserved for an occasional woman prisoner. The sheriff's round, good-natured wife served as jail matron when occasion demanded. She bustled in now, bearing freshly laundered blankets, towels, sheets, several sofa cushions and a little vase of flowers. It wasn't every day that the Jackson jail entertained persons like Madge Kenyon.

"That gentleman is asking if he can come talk to you," she chattered.

"What gentleman?" Madge had a sudden, frightened vision of Stuart calling. Stuart had protested loudly and angrily until a curt word from the sheriff had sent him away. His last words had been meant for reassurance. "Don't worry, darling. I'll get you out."

Drew had answered, with a contemptuous look, "Better do it soon. You might want to get out yourself. This country might get too hot for you."

It was Monty Drew, not Stuart, who presented himself as the sheriff's wife bustled away. Her impulse was to rush to the bars and embrace him. But Drew was smiling. To her heated imagination, it seemed that he was laughing at her, gloating over her.

"I'm sorry I had to do this," he began. "But it's my job—"

This was the man who had scorned her love last night, when she would have given it. Now he had humiliated her before her world. The county would rock with laughter when the news of her arrest spread! And worst of all, he was laughing at her.

She said nothing. Reading the anger in her face, his own face turned grim. The bitterness was between them again, stronger than the steel bars that kept them apart.

"I want to take you out of here," Drew said. "I will, if you'll agree to behave yourself. It won't take five minutes to get you started for home, if you'll just give me your promise to behave."

She cried stormily, "You're wasting your time! I'm not promising anything to you! As for going back to the ranch with you, I prefer jail!"

The broad shoulders shrugged. "I was afraid you'd feel that way," he said coolly. "You can think it over. Your case won't come to trial this week."

He turned away, leaving her grasping the bars and shaking with rage.

CHAPTER FIVE

Heartbreak Trail to Mexico

WITH Drew's going, her pride and rage went, too. Before half an hour had passed, she was listening to every chance voice and footfall, hoping he would come back again.

All the hot, long afternoon he did not come. The sheriff's wife came in the evening, with a home-cooked meal. She was kindly and sympathetic, but Madge could not confide in her and have the county gossips relishing all the details of her folly.

It was late in the night that she waked from a troubled sleep to stare at a man

who was unlocking the cell door. It was Stuart.

His dark eyes shone at her. His teeth gleamed in a triumphant smile. "It's all right. We're leaving this place, sweetheart."

She sat up, startled, as he opened the door.

"My boys have got that night jailer trussed up like a turkey," he chuckled. "I've got a guard watching the street, and if anybody gets nosey they'll never live to tell what they saw. There's a good horse waiting for you."

"I'm not going." She was on her feet, a small, determined figure. "I'm not going to marry you, either. I've changed my mind since this afternoon."

Stuart's hand caught her shoulder. He drew her to him so suddenly that she staggered. He held her close, and his low-pitched voice was rough with his excitement.

"You're not going to change your mind now, Madge. I've risked my men and my own safety, hanging around here to get you. You promised to marry me, and you're going to—as soon as we get over the line into Mexico."

The protest on her lips was stifled as he pressed her head against his shoulder. "Listen," he whispered savagely. "I'm getting out of this country, and I've got to travel fast. There's a United States marshal on my trail. That damned Drew wasn't bluffing."

"Then you—he was right. . . . You've been breaking the law?"

His answer to her muffled cry was a short, mirthless laugh. "Smart girl! You're learning fast. They want me for dope running. Now if you don't want to get hurt, you'll shut up and come quietly. I happen to need you, you see. I'm going to marry you, my dear, all nice and legally. And when you're my wife I'll have old Orrin Kenyon for an in-law. He has enough drag in this state to keep his granddaughter's husband out of a federal prison, or I miss my guess."

Something hard and cold prodded her side. She knew it was the barrel of a gun; and by the dancing, insane light in Stuart's black eyes, she knew she must go with him if she expected to save her life.

Dim shadowy figures lurked in the deserted street outside the courthouse—Stuart's men. She was hurried to the waiting horses, and his whistle brought the gun-guards running in.

There were houses nearby, containing sleeping people, within hearing of her call. But she dared not call. Stuart stayed close beside her, his gun menacing her constantly. They mounted and headed into the desert.

It was too late now to wish for Drew. He was gone, sent away by her own foolish rage and stiff-necked pride. She was riding to Mexico with Stuart, riding to a second marriage ceremony, far more terrible than the farce of today; to a life with this renegade that would be a living hell.

STUART ordered a halt finally. The men built a small blaze.

"Get your sleep while you can," he said to Madge. "We've got some hard riding ahead of us."

In his arms was the blanket he had unrolled for her. Before he could drop it, to snatch for a gun, he found himself staring at Monty Drew.

The fire, catching among dead cactus, flickered over Drew's grim face. It gave sudden intensity to the deadly blue eyes. Drew had a gun in either hand. He had chosen an opportune moment to step out of the shadows, where he had waited.

"I'm glad to see you're taking my advice and riding south," Drew remarked while the staring men slowly raised their empty hands, obedient to his gun gesture. "But you oughtn't to stop to camp, Stuart. That federal marshal is a lot closer

than you think. You can get riding again. I won't stop you."

He looked at Madge. "You don't want to go on with this rat, do you?"

She shuddered. "Please take me home! Just take me home! I—I didn't realize . . . I didn't dream—"

"Don't worry any more," Drew said, his voice gentle. "Come over here, beside me. Careful. Give me room to shoot. . . ."

She saw a shadowy figure behind Drew. One of Stuart's men, unaccounted for in the darkness, rose with upraised hand. As she screamed, the butt of his gun drove onto Drew's skull.

There was a surprised silence, then Stuart's laugh. "Pretty work! I hope you cracked him wide open."

Drew sprawled on the loose sand, his eyes open, staring up at her pitifully. She flung herself across his body, facing the men, halting their sudden rush for him.

"Don't you touch him! If you kill him, you've got to kill me. Drew! Darling!"

Drew's lips moved. His voice was a dry, croaking sound, scarcely audible. "Closer, Madge. Come closer to me."

She obeyed without understanding. She felt his hand grasp hers and press something cold about her wrist. There came a sharp, faint click of steel. Drew struggled to raise himself, holding aloft their two arms. The glint of firelight shone on the steel handcuff by which he had locked them together.

"One up on you, Stuart," he gasped. "If you take her to Mexico, you've got to take me. You won't find the key to this. I threw it over a cliff."

While Stuart gaped, Drew turned to her. "I brought it for you, Madge. Didn't know . . . but I'd have to use it . . . before you changed . . . your mind. . . ."

He weaved drunkenly and dropped, dragging her down.

Stuart examined him and cursed fluently. "Dead to the world!"

He snarled at his gaping gunmen, "Get saddled. We're on the wrong side of the line to talk to any federal men."

THE sun was pouring its early flood across the sea of sand and cactus. Already the plain was baking in the blinding light. Only the shadow of a girl's slender body, bending across him protectively, kept the light and heat from Drew's injured head.

Drew had lain unconscious through the dark, long hours, helpless as a dead man, but breathing normally, his pulse strong.

Her eyes turned to the steel gyve that bound them. "I brought it for you," he had said with his pain-twisted smile. She smiled, and her eyes misted when she thought what it had saved her from.

She studied his still, quiet face. They wouldn't wear that absurd steel link much longer, now! There wouldn't be anything left to hold Drew to her . . . her to him . . . going where he went, loving, cherishing, adoring him! There wouldn't be anything because he didn't love her, didn't want her! She caught her breath in a bitter sob at the thought.

The unconscious man stirred, twitching at the arm bound to her own. His lips moved, and she bent lower to listen. His mind was wandering; he was living over last night in the moonlight. . . .

"Don't look at me like that! I can't kiss you! Even if I hadn't taken this job, even if I was free to tell you, I couldn't! You don't love me. . . ." His face twisted with pain as he said it. Slowly it grew calmer. Then he was smiling. His voice rang suddenly. "But I love her! I love you, Madge. . . . I'll always love you!"

Weariness and terror were forgotten. Madge's face flushed at the truth he had unconsciously revealed. He loved her! Soon he would be well again. And together they could forge another bond that would bind them forever to happiness—together.

TOMBOYS DON'T WASTE KISSES

Her daddy tried once too often to make over Jannice Hartley, to change her from a tomboy into a lady. . . . He should have known that one thing alone could do that: the deep, resistless, womanly longing for the embrace of the man she loves—even when she thinks her love is hate!

He spun, staggering. His .45 slipped from his fingers. She caught him.

By Oliver King

JANNICE HARTLEY opened her eyes to a feeling of darkness, though the day was bright. More by habit than out of her usual eagerness, she slid out of bed, went to the window and stood looking out, breathing the fresh morning air.

The three-sided patio was still deeply

shaded, the way it always was when she waked. The cannas by the fountain burned with their cool flame; the branches of the pepper tree flowed downward in smooth, pale-green arabesques; beyond, on the open side, she could see the yard and the corrals, with the sunlight shining on the coats of the horses. All was the same as usual, yet somehow different.

Then she remembered—that McLane person was coming! That old man!

Frowning rebelliously, she walked into the bathroom. She'd get on a horse and ride, stay away all day. She slid out of the silk of her nightgown and stood looking at herself in the long mirror. The newly budded curves of her body were suddenly distasteful to her.

At first, her maturing body had fascinated her. She used to stand and look at herself in this mirror proudly, enchanted by the slow transformation of her old self into this slender, firm, curved girl, with long, exquisitely formed legs and hips and uptilted breasts which were full and molded with a breath-taking tenderness.

But it had soon become apparent to her that the whole thing was a nuisance. It meant trying to behave like a "lady". It meant that she couldn't yell and cuss and yarn with the hands. It meant that she was grown up, and had to worry about clothes and how she looked. As though she gave a darn how she looked!

"My goodness, Jannice, you look a perfect fright!" Mentally, she mimicked her mother, who had developed a sudden bothersome interest in her and was continually after her about her looks.

She didn't want to become a young lady. And as for marriage—ugh! She shuddered a little. Some day, with a boy her own age, maybe; perhaps someone like that dark man, whose name she did not know, and who was doubtless an outlaw. . . .

She turned away impatiently and dipped the gourd in the tall clay water urn, pouring the water over her in a shower, shocked a little, and pleased, by its cool freshness.

Her bath over, she went in to put on her riding clothes, but they were not in their usual place. She went to the door and shouted imperiously for Ivory, who appeared with her lips compressed a little in an expression which Jannice knew well.

"Where the hell are my ridin' clothes?"

"Put away," Ivory told her firmly. "An' you ain't supposed to cuss like that."

She was an enormous, coal-black Negress, who had been Jannice's nurse and almost her foster mother since she was a baby.

"Put away? What do you mean?"

"Mister Arch an' Mis' Evelyn, they say you ain't to have 'em today. They don' know when they be back with Mister McLane, an' they want you to be here, 'stid of gallivantin' aroun' in them ol' blue jeans."

Jannice stamped her foot, hurt it on the tile floor and swore.

"How dare they!" she said furiously. "You go an' get them for me right away."

Ivory shook her head implacably. "Yo' paw tol' me that hisself, an' you know mighty well that when Mist' Arch say somethin' it ain' me 'ats goin' to do different."

Nor could any amount of storming or wheedling budge her. She brought Jannice a dress. "You wears this, or you wears nothin'," was her ultimatum.

JANNICE felt like tearing the dress to pieces, but her fury did not extend quite that far. She took it and put it on.

It was a silk dress, modestly long, with a high princess waist and a delicate white ruffle about a round, low-cut neck. Sheer stockings and high-heeled slippers completed the costume, which even she had to admit made her look charming.

Ivory regarded her with approval. "Now you look somethin' like," she said with enthusiasm. "Tha's the way a rich, impo'tant gen'man like Mr. Magnus McLane like to see a young lady. He like a wife what stay at home an' look like a lady an' act like a lady. He don' like no tomboy—leas'ways, that's what Mis' Evelyn say, and she know."

"Fat pig," Jannice said viciously.

"How you knew he fat?" Ivory protested. "You ain' never seen him."

"He's old," Jannice said between her teeth. "He's probably old enough to be my father. Bald-headed, I reckon, into the bargain. What do I care about a man forty years old?"

"Seem like I hear Mis' Evelyn say he wa'n't but thutty-seven," Ivory said mildly. "That ain't so old."

"I'm seventeen," Jannice reminded her stormily. "You just wait until somebody tries to marry you off to an old, fat, bald-headed galoot that—"

She broke off, because Ivory was shaking with laughter.

"I sho' goin' to have a long wait," she said between chuckles.

Then she sobered. "Don' you make no mistake, honey chile," she said. "Mo' better you has a husband rich as lard like he is, even if he do look like what de lard come f'um, dan foolin' roun' with some young squidgin what—"

But Jannice had flounced out.

Her temper did not prevent her from having breakfast, though she glowered at the bacon and eggs as though they might be somehow responsible.

"They might have let me ride until they got here," she muttered. "I wish—"

She sat up straight suddenly, her dark eyes blazing with a new thought. When she got up, her lips were set ominously.

"Don't want me to look like a fright, huh?" she whispered. "Just wait!"

She marched out to the porch. "Manuel!"

A young Mexican, who was hunkered down by the corral, looked up and then came running. He took off his hat, respectful but grinning.

"Saddle Red Cloud for me right away," she ordered.

"*Si,* señorita—*muy pronto.*"

She waited impatiently until the Mexican brought the horse, then climbed into the saddle. Manuel watched her, with his jaw dropping.

She looked down at the way the maidenly dress climbed up her silk-stockinged legs, and smiled wickedly. Let this McLane person see her like this!

She put spurs to the horse, just as Ivory came bustling and squawking out onto the porch.

To Jannice's intense satisfaction, it rained after she had been riding an hour. It was a quick, sharp shower, soon over, but what it did to the silk gown was plenty.

An hour later she heard a shot. She was getting up toward the hills where the hawk's nest was, and she wondered instantly if somebody had shot at the mother hawk. It was a nest she had found several days before, with the eggs still unhatched. She was making it her objective today, in the hope of seeing the young hawks.

She spurred her horse and rode in the direction of the shot, hearing another and still another as she rode. If some one of those fool hands had shot that hawk, she would shoot him, by gosh!

The shooting had stopped by the time she rode up into the brushy, upended pocket from which she judged it had come. She saw that this wasn't the place where she discovered the hawk's nest a few days before. She was about to give a shout, to warn the shooter of her presence, when a man rose up suddenly out of the brush at her side and grabbed hold of her bridle reins.

"Don't be in a hurry," he advised, grinning up at her.

THE sight of him startled and scared Jannice. It seemed to her that his was the most evil looking face she had ever seen. And being scared touched off her temper, as it always did.

How did this ugly, debased looking fool dare to take hold of her reins and look at her like that? She raised the quirt which hung at her wrist and slashed him across the face with it. He took a step backward, releasing the reins.

Ahead of her, to the right, a head raised up cautiously just as she set spurs to the horse.

Cursing, the man she had quirted grabbed for her. But the horse leaped forward, and he missed.

She heard a man call out on her left. She drove her horse straight ahead, instinctively ducking low in the saddle.

It was well that she did, for directly behind her a Colt blasted and something sang viciously by her ear. She realized, unbelievingly, that the man she had quirted had actually shot to kill her.

The horse was plunging down a twisting, rocky ravine, brush-bordered. Before the man could shoot again, she was out of sight. Then she realized, with her heart stopping, that she was trapped. Before her reared a rocky cliff, at least sixty feet high and running straight up.

Panting, she pulled the bay horse up, unable to think what to do.

"You're kind of in my jackpot," a dry, slightly sardonic voice said above her. "You better come up here, I reckon."

Startled, she looked up. Through the brush at the edge of a shelf midway up the cliff, she could make out dimly the shoulders and head of a man. She couldn't see what he looked like, but the voice sounded somehow familiar.

"Crawl through the brush at the left there," the voice directed. "There's a place to climb, if you can make it."

The situation fell into place for her suddenly. The men who had tried to stop her had this man holed up here. They were trying to kill or capture him. It was a choice between him and them—and not much of a choice either, remembering the face of the man who had grabbed her rein and the bullet which had sung past her ear.

She got down hurriedly and plunged through the brush which covered the lower part of the cliff. It was thorny, and it tore at her dress and scratched her face and hands, but she forced her way through without stopping. On the other side she found a kind of chimney in the cliff, a steep crevice leading up to the shelf.

"They haven't got it covered yet," the man above said. "You'll be safe until you get to the top. Just climb slow an' try to make it."

Jannice gave a feminine version of a snort. Climb it? Of course she could climb it! She launched herself at it. Halfway up, her ankle twisted so that she cried out involuntarily and almost fell. Those damn high-heeled slippers!

"Take it easier an' you'll get farther," the voice above advised drily.

It infuriated her, so that she almost fell again. Panting, she got to the top, to look into a face she knew, and hated!

SUBCONSCIOUSLY, she realized she had known all along who this was, yet now she stopped dead, and almost started back. The man reached out a swift hand and yanked her under cover, just as a shot rang out and a bullet thudded into the cliff nearby.

"Get some sense, will you?" he rapped out. "This is no place to stand around daydreaming. Better get in the hut." He motioned toward an adobe structure which she had not noticed before.

She stalked into it. It was not so much a hut as a cave which had been given an adobe front wall. An abandoned goatherder's place, she guessed.

She looked at him scornfully. "From

your manners, I'd say you belonged in a place like this," she told him.

He grinned. "Still as pleasant as ever," he jibed. "An' still hornin' in where you aren't wanted."

She stared at him speechlessly, half minded to walk out again. What was there about this man that angered her so, she wondered. And then she knew. It was because he got the better of her, made her feel like an inadequate fool.

She remembered vividly the first time she'd met him, their only meeting until now. He had been fishing. Unaware of him, she was engaged in the game of racing Red Cloud in and out of the trees along the bank of Cate Creek, just for the hell of it, as she told herself. Red Cloud's hoofs had tossed rocks and dirt into a pool, and an angry voice had yelled at her, "What do you think you're doing?"

It appeared that she had scared a trout he had been fishing for—a big one. She wasn't used to being talked to that way. And when she flared out at him, he told her she ought to be spanked. She rode Red Cloud into the pool then, with the firm intention of completing her job of scaring the fish. Unluckily, the horse had slipped on the rocks and fallen. She had gone into the water, fighting to get clear. But when Red Cloud scrambled to his feet, her foot had been caught in the stirrup and she was held head down in the water, flailing desperately, helplessly.

Sputtering, she came out of it suddenly. The man had seized her by her belt and was holding her suspended above the water, while he disengaged her foot from the stirrup.

He was in no hurry about it. Even after her foot was free, he kept her hanging, head and feet down, from an arm that made her feel as though she were suspended by the back of her jeans from a steel beam. Then he walked with her to the bank.

He spoke to Red Cloud in a queerly choked voice and had evidently taken his bridle, for she could see the horse's legs sloshing through the water at her side.

After a final shake, as though he were snapping out a wet rag, he put her down on the bank, more furious and humiliated than she had ever been in her life. After that, he sat down suddenly, and she saw that he was weak and shaking with silent laughter. Raging, but speechless, she had flung into the saddle and spurred off.

He had yelled after her, but her burning ears had been deaf to his words. She had told herself savagely that she'd like to kill him, that she hoped she'd never see him again, that she'd get even some day, which was a little illogical, and she had tried to wipe the very memory of him from her mind.

Unfortunately, his voice and features had remained more vividly imprinted in her memory than any others she had ever known.

LOOKING at him now, she had to admit angrily that he was good looking enough if you liked that kind of looks—a strong, clean-cut nose over long, mobile, firm lips and a jutting jaw with a dimple in it. He had blue-gray, luminous eyes, and dark lashes and Indian-black hair.

"Good looking, and he knows it," she thought scornfully.

"Sit down and make yourself at home, miss. . . ?" He paused inquiringly.

She disregarded the inquiry. "Who are those men?" she demanded. "Why are they trying to kill you?"

He shrugged, his eyes amused. "Not knowin', I couldn't say."

She stared at him. "You mean that they've got you holed up here, and you don't even know who they are?"

"I was ridin' through, an' they tried to drygulch me. Got my horse. I didn't stop to ask them their reasons." He grinned, adding, "There wasn't anybody around to introduce us, anyway."

Outside, a voice called: "We got you, Pete. Better come out before the gal gets lead-poisonin' along with you."

Jannice set her mouth grimly. So he had been lying!

The man called Pete laughed, did not reply. "The voice sounds familiar," he commented, "but even without that, I think I'd stay right here."

"Gallant as always," Jannice told him with contempt.

His eyes grew grave. "It wouldn't do you any good if I gave up," he said soberly. "They've got to kill me, you see. And that means that they couldn't afford to let you go away, knowin' who had done it."

She gasped. "Do you mean to say they'd kill me, too?"

He nodded. "I'm afraid it's like that."

"I don't believe it," she told him, tossing her head. "They wouldn't dare. That man only shot at me because he lost his temper at being quirted."

He shrugged. "I wouldn't depend on that," he said drily.

Her mind was busy with other things. Pete . . . Pete Danbury! She sat down suddenly, feeling weak. Things began to piece together in her head.

Pecos Pete Danbury was a well-known outlaw who, rumor had it, was tied up with Hodge Morgan, her father's enemy. It was something about the railroad, she knew. Her father needed money, and if the railroad came through here he'd get it. Hodge Morgan was fighting to have it go through Sago Flat, forty miles away. She knew vaguely that this section was known as outlaw country and that the railroad people wouldn't run through here unless it was cleaned up. It was whispered that Hodge Morgan was the secret head of the outlaws, and that the railroad knew it. If the road went where Hodge wanted it, it would be safe from his molestation.

It was because of all this that her father was so anxious for the friendship of Magnus McLane. With McLane's power and political influence, he was counted the only man who could successfully oppose Morgan, clean up the country and let the road come through here instead of making a detour to Sago Flat.

It came to her in a breathless rush that she might be able to help out. She'd be nice to Pecos Pete Danbury. She might make him talk, tell her something that would be useful to her father. She might even get him away from Hodge Morgan, make him come over to their side. Then her refusal to be nice to Magnus McLane wouldn't matter.

SHE drew a long breath, got up, and sat down by Pete Danbury, who was sitting on the floor, looking out a sort of loop hole formed by the crumbling of one of the adobe bricks. If only she knew more about these things! If only she had paid more attention to the way girls had with men, instead of always helling around on horseback!

"I'm sorry I clawed at you," she said, smiling sweetly. "It was funny about my falling into the water. I really deserved it."

His quick, sidelong glance was suspicious. "Nice of you to take it like that." He looked puzzled.

She leaned forward, innocently, looking out the loophole. She wanted to get a look, if possible at the men outside. She guessed now that they must be her father's men. He had been threatening to fight fire with fire by hiring gunmen to kill off Hodge Morgan's outlaws. She hadn't known he had gone this far with it. The man who had shot at her had had no idea, of course, who she was.

But leaning forward also served the purpose of bringing her nearer to Pete Danbury. She had to make him conscious of her as a desirable woman instead of a bad-tempered girl.

He pulled her away from the loophole quickly. "Don't do that," he said quietly.

She looked up at him meltingly. "It's no more chance for me than it is for you," she told him softly.

He shot her a quick, questioning look, but made no reply. For a short time they sat in silence. The men outside weren't showing themselves. She wondered what they were waiting for.

As though reading her thoughts, he said, "They won't try anythin' until nightfall."

She relaxed a little. That gave her more time. If only her father did not come home early, miss her, and manage to trail her here!

She glanced up, to find Pete looking at her with amusement. "You're shore a honey for costumes," he said. "Last time I saw you you looked like a drownin' frog, but now you look more like a dance gal on New Year's mornin'."

She dropped her eyes suddenly to hide the quick flare of temper in them. Her glance fell on her thigh, showing through a rent in the silk gown. She covered it hastily, flushing. But after a moment, an idea came to her. She looked at him provocatively.

"How else is a dance girl supposed to look when she's been through a briar patch?" she demanded.

His eyes widened, then he half-grinned. She thought his glance, as he examined her, was suddenly more attentive. Her heart began to beat faster. She had hit on just the device to get his interest. Afterwards, when he found out she really wasn't a dance-hall girl, he'd be even more interested.

To explain why she had happened to be riding in that costume, she hastily invented a story about having been bothered by the attentions of the dance-hall proprietor and taking a horse and escaping, on impulse. She thought it was a good story. She told it with conviction, not forgetting to make her tone intimate and her eyes provocative.

At the end, she lifted her shoulders. "He was fat," she told him. "I hate fat men. If I were to choose a man, he'd be tall and dark, with big shoulders—an outdoor man who could be a top-hand with cows or horses, if he didn't love excitement too much to bother with those things." She looked at him dreamily as she said it.

He glanced out of the peep-hole. His expression was queer for a moment. She guessed that he had understood her, and she felt a little thrill of excitement under her breastbone.

Presently, he sat back and began to ask her details of her trouble with the saloon keeper, listening with grave sympathy while she told them.

At the end, he nodded soberly. "That's shore a mighty lowdown man," he said. "If I was you, I'd tell my father on him, Miss Hartley."

JANNICE stared at him, feeling her cheeks begin to flame. He had known who she was all along! And he had led her on!

For a time, she could not speak, could only sit with lowered head, trying to hold onto herself. She never had wanted to kill anybody so much as this man.

"But he'll pay for it!" she promised herself stormily.

Presently, she looked up with a smile that was all candor.

"I was afraid to tell you who I was," she said. "You see, I know you, too, Mr. Pete Danbury."

He looked thoroughly startled at that, she noted with satisfaction.

"You see," she told him softly, "I knew you and dad were on opposite sides of the fence, and I was afraid you wouldn't trust me. But I don't care anything about the silly old railroad. I—I think everybody has the right to—to live their own life, don't you."

The outlaw nodded thoughtful agree-

ment. "Reckon you're right. But I still can't figure what you're doin' ridin' away out here in those clothes."

She drew a long breath, decided that it would suit her purpose to tell him the truth.

"It's because of this railroad business," she said. "Dad wants old Magnus McLane to help him, and he's trying to throw me at the man's head. Magnus McLane was coming to the ranch today, an' dad hid my riding clothes an' made me wear this dress, so—so I just ran away."

"I take it you don't cotton to this McLane."

"An old fat bald-headed critter, forty years old?" Jannice demanded with spirit. "A man that's so awful he can't even get a girl, but has to go tryin' to marry one he hasn't even seen? I should say not!"

"Oh!" the outlaw said reflectively. "I thought you said it was your father who was tryin' to marry you off to him."

"He must have said something to make dad start thinkin' about it. Anyway, it was him asked dad if he could come an' meet me."

Pete Danbury's eyes showed a flicker of amusement.

"Don't sound like he was the right man for you, at that," he remarked.

"You like a tall dark man better," he threw out after a moment's reflection.

Jannice looked at him soulfully, "Yes," she murmured.

"An outlaw?"

"Maybe." It was easy to look shy.

The outlaw leaned toward her suddenly, his eyes cold. "An' maybe you'd try to make a fool out of an outlaw, to help your father," he shot at her, his voice suddenly harsh, brutal.

She caught her breath sharply, her heart jumping with sudden fear. "No. No. You mustn't think that," she told him swiftly, but she had a feeling that her eyes had betrayed her.

He leaned closer. "You mean it? You swear it?" he demanded, more gently.

She shut her eyes. "Yes," she lied softly.

Then he was kissing her. She had expected that, invited it, but now that it was here, panic filled her. She tried to pull away. His hard hand, behind her head, held her. His lips bruised her mouth. Her head felt queerly light and floaty, yet with a queer brilliance in it. Inside, she was in a sudden turmoil, as though all the parts of her had broken up and were quivering, and her legs felt weak.

She struggled to get free. But his other arm caught her, swept her close to him, and his lips held hers. Fire began to burn along her veins. The turmoil inside was a kind of mad ecstasy now. Against her will, her body gave to his. She clung to him, her lips aching and wildly hungry. The madness was killing her, smothering. Her fused nerves were keyed so high that she would die. . . .

SHE went limp and weak and fought free from him, transformed suddenly into a wildcat. She got to her feet, gasping, glaring at him wildly.

"Oh!" she breathed, "Oh, how dare you?" There was a sudden, trembling fury in her.

He, too, was on his feet, breathing a little hard, his mouth tight, almost grim.

"You—you asked for it," he said.

"I hate you," she cried at him, stamping. "I never want to see you again. I hate you."

His face looked as though she had hit him, but it did not soften her. She only wanted to get away—get away from the mere sight of him. She turned and ran out the door.

His startled shout did not check her. Careless of whether she was shot at or not, she ran to the edge of the shelf. He caught her just as she was getting down.

For a moment, they struggled there on the edge of the chimney. Then a shot cracked out below, and lead bit at the wall

behind them. His left arm flung her toward the door, so that she fell flat. His right lashed for his holstered Colt. Another gun blasted below and he spun, staggering. His .45 slipped from his fingers. It fell, clattering on the rock, and slid off the shelf. She caught him as he stood there, apparently dazed, and rushed him into the hut, making him lie down, crying out over him.

"I'm sorry. Oh, I'm sorry. Are you badly hurt? Oh, it's my fault."

"No," he smiled at her painfully. "Mine. I'm sorry. Started it to—teach you—a lesson. Then got caught myself. You—set me on fire."

"I know. I know. I felt it, too," she cried. "I was running from that—not you. Oh, be still, so I can see your hurt."

"No use," he said, through set teeth. "It's only the shoulder. But—they'll be up now. And I—dropped the gun—like a fool."

"If they're daddy's men, I'll—"

"They're not."

"Then, who are—"

"Kid, I'm sorry," he said gently. "I wouldn't have gotten you into this for anything."

She wasn't listening to him any longer. She was telling herself that she had murdered him. Swiftly, she whirled and darted out, kicking off her slippers as she ran. They yelled at her as she came out, but did not fire. She almost flung herself off the edge, and began to climb down.

"She's goin' after the gun," one of them shouted. "I told you I was sure I saw it fall."

"Get her! Close in!"

It was there, at the bottom. She flung herself on it, and began to climb, cutting her stockinged feet on the rocks, but moving with the speed and nimbleness of a mountain goat.

A shot ripped by her as she appeared on the shelf. Then, panting, she was inside.

"He's hurt bad," she heard somebody yell, "or she wouldn't have . . . Go up!"

They were coming.

"Get in the corner, out of the way," Pete ripped at her, grabbing the gun in his left hand.

Then they were in, with a rush. . . .

THE hut filled with the deafening, staccato thunder of guns. She saw the man she had quirted go down, sliding on his face, as Pete's slug took him. Another staggered, dropped his gun clutching at his gunhand. A third leaped forward, sixgun clubbed.

Pete tried to dodge, but the blow clipped him on the side of the head. Jannice saw his face go white. He dropped his own gun, caught the other man's gun hand, pulling him forward, and they went down together.

And then she saw Hodge Morgan! Bigjowled, slit-eyed, he was standing in the doorway, trying to get a shot at Pete without hitting his own man. As he moved forward, Jannice flung herself on his gunarm desperately. She had to hold him until Pete got back into action.

Hodge Morgan barely noticed her. His left hand reached over, caught her dress at the shoulder and yanked. The dress ripped. He caught her back of the neck then, and flung her headlong across the room, as a man might hurl a clawing kitten.

Her elbow hit on something excruciatingly hard—an old iron frying pan, half buried in the debris at the back of the hut. Pete Danbury, fighting like a catamount despite his wounded shoulder, had rolled his man over, smashed his head against the floor. The man went limp. . . . Hodge Morgan, lips drawn back, leveled his gun to fire.

Jannice swung the heavy iron frying pan with all her strength. It took Hodge Morgan behind the ear, dropped him like a poled steer. His gun went off, but the bullet dug harmlessly into the floor.

For a long moment there was silence. Then Jannice heard a shout outside. Horses were trampling excitedly. There were footsteps on the shelf. Her father, fierce-eyed was barging in through the doorway.

Jannice's knees went weak. She read the relief in her father's eyes, then instant fury. She wondered, not realizing that her dress had been torn half off of her.

Her father's fierce gaze swept the room, as though looking for a victim, fell on Pete, who was staggering to his feet.

"McLane! Great God, man! What are you doin' here?"

Jannice stared, open-mouthed. Had her father gone crazy?

"Morgan and his killers jumped me," Pete was saying, "and I had to hole up here. They figured I was goin' to throw in with you for the railroad, I reckon—in which"—he tossed a glance at Jannice—"they were right."

Jannice's head was whirling. Pete Danbury was Magnus McLane! Or was she crazy, too, along with the rest of them?

"Then your daughter happened by—"

The ranch hands had crowded in behind her father. Jannice saw their eyes turn toward her curiously, and she became aware of her torn dress. She caught it up hastily.

Her father glanced at her sternly, then with something like apology at Magnus McLane. "She's not—er—not always such a tomboy," he said, and cleared his throat.

"No," McLane said softly, looking at Jannice, "she seems all woman to me. I reckon tomboys grow into the finest ones."

"But—but they called you Pete." Jannice was still a little dazed.

"Everybody always has," Pete told her, smiling. "A man couldn't go around being called Magnus, now could he? Not even an old man!" There was amusement in his eyes, and understanding, and a sudden, intimate tenderness.

Jannice blushed. A sudden storm of happiness was blowing up in her, so that she felt she couldn't endure it. So this was what it meant to grow up! He had called her a woman, and she knew suddenly that that was what she was.

"Please go out, everybody," she said faintly.

Her father began to say something that she didn't hear, but which had "railroad" in it.

"*Will* you go out and let me fix myself?" she cried, stamping. "C-can't you see I look like a perfect fright?"

Mail Order Bride by Peggy Gaddis is the story of a girl who spent her last cent to answer an ad for a mail order bride, and then found the whole thing was a hoax. Also stories by Vina Lawrence, Cynthia Sutton, Helen Ahern, Helen Lathrop and others; handwriting, astrology, palmistry and card reading features; two pages of patterns and a big department of Pen Pals.

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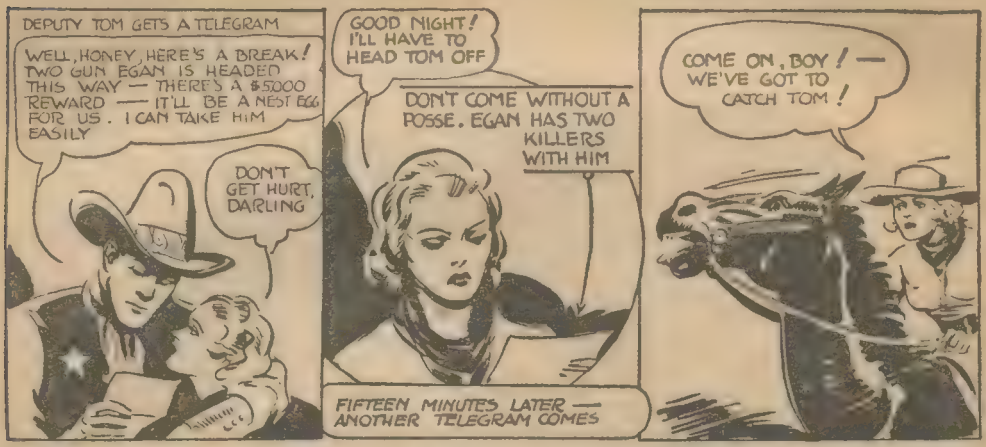
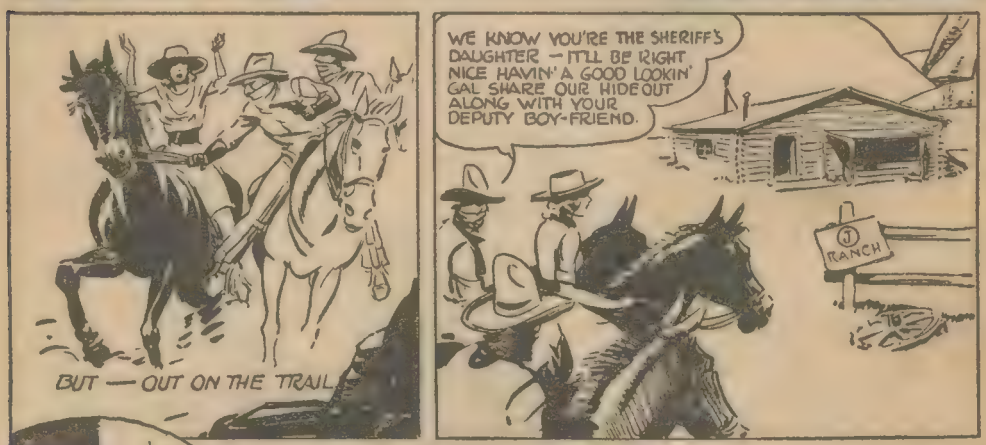
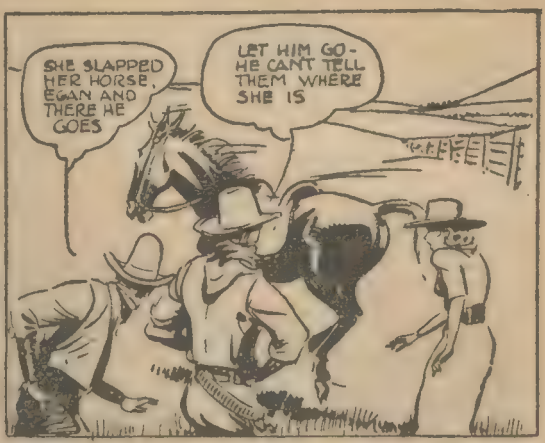

DEPUTY TOM GETS A TELEGRAM
WELL, HONEY, HERE'S A BREAK! TWO GUN EGAN IS HEADED THIS WAY — THERE'S A $5000 REWARD — IT'LL BE A NEST EGG FOR US. I CAN TAKE HIM EASILY
DON'T GET HURT, DARLING
GOOD NIGHT! I'LL HAVE TO HEAD TOM OFF
DON'T COME WITHOUT A POSSE. EGAN HAS TWO KILLERS WITH HIM
FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER — ANOTHER TELEGRAM COMES
COME ON, BOY! — WE'VE GOT TO CATCH TOM!

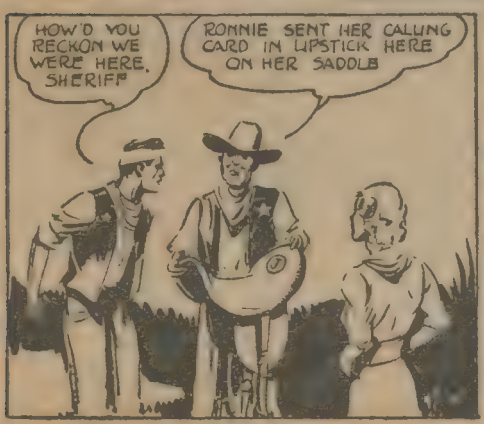

BUT — OUT ON THE TRAIL
WE KNOW YOU'RE THE SHERIFF'S DAUGHTER — IT'LL BE RIGHT NICE HAVIN' A GOOD LOOKIN' GAL SHARE OUR HIDE OUT ALONG WITH YOUR DEPUTY BOY-FRIEND.
J RANCH
TOM, A PRISONER AT THE ABANDONED CIRCLE J RANCH, HEARS HORSES COMING
I'LL HAVE TO MAKE UP PRETTY IF I'M TO BE A GUEST HERE
LET HER GO, YOU SKUNKS!
TOM SEES RONNIE A CAPTIVE AND MAKES A BREAK.

LOVE CALLS A SHERIFF'S POSSE

A tabloid story of Western Love

By REX MAXON





EXILE TRAIL—FOR TWO

By L. P. Holmes

She had dreamed of a man like this. No, it mustn't be he to die!

Some day he would come, the tall rider who would take heart-broken little Lea Willoughby out of that miserable sink of terror, at the desert's edge. . . . When at last he did, with a lashing quirt that set Lea free—could she let him ride on, alone, to face the outlaw guns that challenged his right to her love?

FOR AS FAR back as she could remember, the biggest vista in Lea Willoughby's life had been the red, furnace-like vastness of the Rickaree Desert. It lay to the south and east of the shabby little cabin Lea called home.

To the north and west, marched the Black Rim, a wall of black lava, desolate, bleak and forbidding. The Black Rim was like a prison wall to Lea, and she

hated it. She had never been able to exactly define her feelings toward the desert. Sometimes she thought that she hated that, also. Yet, at other times she loved it. Always it fascinated her. At its worst, the desert never made you feel like you were in prison, as did the Black Rim.

The slim, big-eyed girl in gingham would crouch for hours at a time in the shadow of the cabin and watch the desert. In the middle of the day it was a crimson, heat-blasted monster. But in the evening it held beauty beyond words. Mists of lavender and violet and seductive purple would writhe and twist and flow across it, softening it, cooling it, filling it with the mysterious lure of great distances and incalculable miles of freedom.

The times when Lea felt that she hated the desert were those when Tate Shreve and his men came riding up out of it. And they came at regular intervals, sun-blackened, dust-grimed, murky with sweat and dirt, their hard, reckless eyes offensive with crass stares, their language violent, explosive, brutally obscene.

It was about time for Shreve and his crowd to show up again. Tom Anson had got back the day before from one of his periodic trips by pack-train out into the world which lay beyond the Black Rim. And along with the food stuffs and supplies he had brought in, were those half dozen little curved oblong casks of raw whiskey. Experience had shown Lea that whenever Anson brought in whiskey, Shreve and his renegades would be riding to the cabin.

The girl, crouched there in the cabin shadow, stirred uneasily. While the whiskey lasted, Shreve and his men would be like wild animals. These drunken debauches were always periods of terror for her. She could remember how, as a child, she had cowered and sobbed in her crude, barren little chamber, while the renegades made the night hideous with their howling songs, their curses, their fights. And then, when the terror and the renegades were gone, there would be a fresh mound of earth thrown up on the little flat which separated the cabin from the Black Rim, a mound at which grazing horses and pack mules would sniff and rear away.

As she had grown older, that first instinctive childish fear had been replaced by a deeper terror. Now those renegades would stare at her in a way that made her smooth, brown flesh creep, that sent cold shivers of horror and repulsion up and down her spine. And on more than one night, when drunkenness and beastiality were rampant, she had climbed through the narrow window above her bunk and stolen down to the edge of the desert, there to sleep uneasily in the still, warm sand, until gray day came. . . .

A HARSH voice from the cabin broke into Lea's moody reverie. "Girl! Girl, where are you? It's time for evenin' grub—and I'm hungry."

Lea hurried in at the back door, stirred up a fire in the old, greasy stove. Tom Anson was seated at the kitchen table, a glass of whiskey before him. His eyes were bloodshot, and held that cruel, crafty look which they always took on when he had been drinking.

Tom Anson had been a big man once. But hard living and encroaching years had hunched his shoulders, furrowed his face and turned his hair to an untidy, dirty gray. With his beaked nose and thin lips and the stoop of his shoulders, he had a predatory, grasping appearance. His clothes were ragged, caked with dirt.

Lea knew that Tom Anson wasn't her father. She had learned that one day, when, drunk and angry, he had cursed at her and called her a worthless little brat. He had told her then that he had taken her in as a homeless child, and that now he expected her to repay him in hard work for the care he had given her. He had told her also that her real father was a

man named Willoughby. That is all Lea knew of her past or antecedents.

Lea sliced bacon and put it in a pan. She began mixing up some bisquit dough.

"Tate Shreve and the boys will be in tonight or tomorrow," said Anson harshly. "And I want you to be more friendly toward Tate. He was put out the way you acted last time he was here."

Something akin to sullenness showed in Lea's brooding eyes. "I hate him," she said fiercely. "Before I'd let him touch me, I'd—I'd kill myself."

"Tate's my friend, and good enough for me. You'll be friendly-like to him."

"I won't! You got no right to ask—"

"You will," snarled Anson.

"I won't!"

Anson got slowly to his feet, reached down a quirt hanging on the kitchen wall. He drew the cruel lash slowly through his hooked, talon fingers.

"I wore out more than one mesquite switch on you when you were a kid," he said thinly. "Now, if I have to, I'll wear this quirt out on you. Will you make up to Tate when he rides in this time?"

A flirt of terror went through her. In his rage, Anson was merciless. If he started after her with that quirt . . . Lea whirled to face him squarely. In one small, brown fist she gripped the big butcher knife she had used to slice the bacon.

"You hit me with that quirt and I'll use this knife on you," she told him bleakly. "I'll—I'll kill you, Tom Anson."

Anson cursed and lunged at her. Terror wiped all defiance out of Lea. She dropped the butcher knife and ran for the back door. She dodged the first cruel cut Anson threw at her, but the second curled about one bare forearm, and the burning agony of it was like the clasp of a circle of red hot iron. Despite herself, a cry of agony broke from Lea's lips. The next moment she was out of the door, with Anson lunging close behind.

AND then, out of nowhere, a tall, lean figure flashed into view. There sounded the impact of charging bodies crashing together, then a floundering fall, and a startled burst of cursing from Anson. Lea stopped and turned, though still backing slowly away, hugging her lashed and burning forearm to her body.

Tom Anson was half-lying, half-sitting on the ground, staring up at the man who stood over him. The stranger, in dusty boots, worn jeans and with wide, flat, powerful shoulders swelling under a faded blue shirt, had jerked the quirt from Anson's hand and was swishing it up and down in swift, angry strokes.

"You'd quirt a woman, would you?" he said in a cold, contemptuous drawl. "Well, see how you like it!"

The quirt rose and fell in a vicious hiss across Tom Anson's back. Anson let out a shriek of pain.

"Hurts, don't it?" crackled the stranger.

Again the quirt rose and fell, and again Anson shrieked. He began crawling away on hands and knees like a whipped dog.

"Don't hit me!" he bawled. "Gawdamighty, man, don't hit me again! I'm an old man—"

"An old skunk, you mean," came the scathing reply. "Next time you'll think twice before you quirt a woman. Stay put! Don't try and sneak away for a gun."

Anson crouched there, glowering, his eyes red and furtive with hate and fear. The stranger turned and looked at Lea. His face was lean and sun-blackened, harshly grim. His eyes held the piercing quality of a burnished sword's point.

"Ma'am," he drawled, "if this polecat hurt you real bad, I'll whip him to a rag."

Lea shook her head. "He—he only hit me once. He's paid for that."

"Your father?" queried the stranger.

"No. But I've lived here most of my life."

"I know who he is. He's Anson, Tom Anson. And you, ma'am?"

"I am Lea Willoughby. No relative of his."

"Shore, I'm glad to hear that. My name is Curtis—Dave Curtis, ma'am."

At this admission, Tom Anson started visibly, then seemed to shrink a trifle, the fear in his eyes deepening.

"I just came in out of the desert," went on Curtis. "Do you reckon I could get a little grazing for my bronc, and a bite of food for myself? I'll pay for it."

Lea's wide eyes went first to Anson, then came back to meet the piercing glance of the stranger. She drew a deep breath. The blow she had received from that quirt had unleashed something in Lea. Defiance, which had long been building up in her, broke into the open.

"You won't have to pay for it," she said steadily. "While you're tending your bronc, I'll stir up a meal for you."

"That's right generous of you, ma'am," said the rider. "A hungry man and a hungry bronc say, 'Thanks.' You—" and here his flashing eyes stabbed at Anson—"you get up and come along with me."

From the shadowy interior of the cabin, Lea watched this stranger, Dave Curtis, lead his dusty roan bronc down to the spring and unsaddle. Tom Anson slouched along behind, and Lea could imagine the threats of hate and fear which were running through his mind. The arrival of this stranger was a momentous thing in Lea's life. He had spoken to her with respect—and he had whipped Tom Anson.

LEA ran to her dingy little room, and before a fragment of broken looking glass, brushed her hair and tidied up. By the time Curtis and Anson returned to the cabin, she was busy over the stove.

She threw a swift glance at the lean, hawk-faced man. His features suggested the unchanging lava of Black Rim, the stoic strength of the desert. It was the steely gleam of his eyes which made his face alive, alert. It was that cold, gray glint which made one realize that this man was always watching, always listening, never off his guard.

Tom Anson was sullen. He sat in a corner, hunched and silent, his red eyes going first to the stranger, then to Lea, then back to the stranger again.

When the food was ready, Anson refused to eat, and the stranger barked a harsh order to him. "Sit yonder, where I can keep an eye on you."

Anson, mumbling a curse, did as he was told. Lea made no attempt to eat, until the stranger spoke to her. There was that same quiet dignity and respect in his voice.

"I'd appreciate your having a bite with me, ma'am. It's a long time since I sat across the table from a—a woman."

Lea was too excited to eat much, but it gave her a strange and wistful pleasure to put more and more food before this Dave Curtis, who was obviously famished.

Abruptly the stranger looked hard at Anson. "When you expectin' Tate Shreve and his pack of coyotes?"

Anson gave a little jerk of surprise, then licked his lips furtively. "Don't know what you're drivin' at," he muttered.

"I know that Shreve comes here at regular intervals. When will he show up next?"

Anson showed a burst of sudden defiance. "When he gets damned good and ready, I reckon."

Lea spoke, hardly realizing the import of her words. "He's expecting Shreve tonight or tomorrow, mister."

"Ah!" said Curtis. "That is good."

Anson spat a curse at Lea. "You nosey brat! For that, you'll wish you'd never been born. You'll—"

Curtis started to get out of his chair. "You ain't had enough of that quirt, I reckon, Anson. You'll talk civil to this

girl, if I have to whip you to ribbons. You'll take that back or—"

Anson writhed furiously in his chair. "I take it back."

"And you better eat somethin'," advised Curtis. "Else you'll go a long time without grub. Because, soon as I finish, I'm tyin' you to a bunk."

"Tie me to a bunk! What for? I've done nothin' to you. Who do you think you are, anyhow? When Tate gets here, he'll make you wish—"

Curtis smiled thinly. "I'll take care of Shreve. And I'm makin' shore that you ain't runnin' loose to warn him or help him. You better eat."

Anson hunched forward, gnawing at his clenched knuckles. Lea had seen him in many of his rages. But she had never seen him as full of impotent poison as he was now. Her own heart was thumping wildly. What did this stranger mean to do? What could he do against the odds of Tate Shreve and his crowd of renegades?

DAVE CURTIS finished his meal, built and lighted a cigarette. Outside, the gloom of night was settling. In the cabin it was almost dark. Curtis stood up, moved around toward Anson.

"I warned you," he drawled. "It's your own fault you'll have to go hungry."

Anson, with speed amazing for one of his years, made a sudden leap for the open door. But he was no match for the pantherish speed of the other man. Curtis caught him, spun him around, pulled his wrists behind him and tied them there with a piggin string he drew from his pocket. Then he dragged Anson into the inner room, tossed him onto a wall bunk. He tied Anson to the bunk and gagged him with his own neckerchief.

"It'll be a long night for you, probably," drawled Curtis. "But it's your own fault."

When he came back into the kitchen, Lea stood before the stove, and there was strain and watchfulness in her attitude.

Curtis smiled gravely. "You got nothin' to fear from me, ma'am," he said quietly. "My only concern is Shreve—and his pack. Shreve is no friend of yours?"

"No," said Lea steadily. "I hate him. It was over Shreve, that he—" she nodded toward the other room—"that he tried to quirt me. He told me I had to make up to Shreve. I'd rather die."

"You poor kid. Wish I'd whipped him more. You say he's expecting Shreve in tonight or tomorrow?"

"Yes, he said that. You—you better be careful, mister. Shreve, he's poison with guns. And there's Leeds and Sluefoot—"

"You've named the three I want," said Curtis quietly. "They always come in the same way?"

"Always. Out of the desert. Come with me. I'll show you."

They went out. The desert was a purplish black gulf of mystery now, running out to the very limits of the world.

"They come in that way," said Lea, pointing, "past those rocks down yonder and the other side of that patch which looks like a shadow, but which is mesquite brush. What you aim to do, mister?"

"Lay out for 'em, I reckon. That bunch of rocks is a good place. You—you won't warn 'em?"

Lea stood very straight, shaking her head. "I hate Shreve, I tell you. I want to go down there with you. I can help. I can shoot a rifle real good."

For a long time the stranger did not answer. His piercing eyes were fixed on the desert, a look of brooding in them.

Abruptly he nodded. "Get your rifle and come along."

THE mystery of the desert night stalked abroad. Overhead, the countless stars glittered, warm and close and brilliant. Their combined light laid a strange and fascinating radiance over the world.

Lea Willoughby, crouched down in a hollow among the rocks, was a-tingle with

the thrill of this first great adventure of her life. She tingled from head to toe with a variety of emotions she could not identify. These last few tumultuous hours had seen her whole life scene change. The drab loneliness had been broken. No matter what the outcome of this one splendid night, she knew that life had taken a right-angle turn for her. She could never go back to that dingy cabin, to the brutality and abuse which she knew would be her portion if Tom Anson ever had his way with her again. In siding in with this strange rider, she had cut loose from all the tawdry ties of her past life. In a way, this knowledge terrified her—yet made her exquisitely happy.

Dave Curtis was higher up among the rocks, where he could watch all sides.

He spoke abruptly. "Come up here and tell me all about yourself."

Lea crept up beside him. And though she was hesitant and shy, bit by bit he wormed from her all of her story. She told him of the drunken nights when Shreve and his crowd were at the cabin. She told of her terror as a child, of her still greater terror in later years; told him how she would creep from the cabin at night and curl up for sleep down here in the desert. And when she had finished, he said the same thing he had said before.

"You poor kid."

For a long time there was silence between them, as they crouched there in the rocks, the slow pulse of the sleeping desert around them.

"It's going to be a long night," said Curtis presently. "You're going to be powerful sleepy later on. Would you watch now, for a couple of hours, while I get a few winks? I ain't been sleepin' much lately."

"I'll watch," said Lea simply. "I couldn't sleep—now."

He caught one of her hands, squeezed it gently. "You'll do to take along."

Somehow there was a significance in his tone that left Lea breathless, and with wide eyes which matched the stars in their brilliance.

Dave Curtis dropped down to the sand below the rocks and stretched out. Lea heard him give a deep, weary sigh. And then there was only the slow, steady breathing of a man deep in slumber.

A tremendous exultation grew in Lea. This man put absolute trust in her, though he had known her but a few short hours. He had accepted her, just a desert waif, as a partner in this hour of peril and conflict. The responsibility of it inspired her. Her glowing eyes searched the night.

Never, she thought, had the desert held so much mysterious beauty. On those other nights, when she had stolen down here to safety from the drunken renegades at the cabin, the desert had meant security. But tonight it held promise. . . .

In the far distance a coyote mourned at the stars. Nearer at hand another of the four-footed slinkers took up the song. Bit by bit the night grew colder, and with the chill the stars seemed to increase in their brilliance. Overhead invisible nighthawks drifted, sending down their pure, plaintive cry. Abruptly, down there in the hidden distance, sounded the deeper, hoarse wail of a wolf.

Lea set herself for an all-night watch. This lean, sun-blackened, hawk-faced rider in his weary sprawl below her—she'd let him sleep the night through. She'd prove to him the worth of his trust in her.

She knew enough of the vast wheel of stars to tell when it was midnight. And still there was no sound from the desert, aside from the drifting wild life which hunted and lived and died in the darkness. Once she heard the death squeal of a rabbit under the slashing jaws of a coyote.

She shivered then, and not from chill. The desert, for all its beauty, could still be cruel and savage. . . . It was from out there somewhere that Tate Shreve and his renegades were riding!

Those still, cold hours of the very early morning crept by. Once Lea found herself dozing, in spite of herself. And she knew a start and quick thudding of her heart as a long lean figure moved up beside her.

"Daylight is less than two hours away," he accused. "You shouldn't have let me sleep so long, ma'am. You're a salty little maverick, for shore. Now you curl up and get some sleep yourself."

Lea yawned, smiled to herself and curled up in a pocket of the rocks. Sleep came down like a blanket.

A LOW whistle brought her awake. For a short second she was bewildered with her surroundings. She opened her eyes to a sky that was turning a soft, rosy gray. Against that sky she saw Dave Curtis. He had dropped low against the rocks, and in the taut poise of his panther-ish body was the story of his alarm. He was peering steadily to the southwest.

Lea crept up beside him. She followed the direction of his gaze. Down there where the mists were slowly lifting, rode a file of horsemen. Tate Shreve and his men!

Lea's rifle clinked softly as she drew it up beside her. "You stay out of this," Dave Curtis told her harshly. "You get down in the rocks and stay there. This is my chore, all the way. Out there are the skunks who raided the ranch of my best friend, way down on the Pagan River, below the desert. They killed him and they fired his ranch. And that friend had a wife and child, who were caught in that burning house—and never got out. Ever since, I've been trailing them. And now I've caught up with them!"

"When you told your name, back at the cabin," quavered the excited girl, "Anson looked scared. Why was that?"

"Because it's known pretty well all across the desert and the rim that I'm after Shreve. I reckon Anson heard of that. And maybe he figgered that I'd tie him in with Shreve's crowd and throw a gun on him, too. Maybe I will, before this is done. Now, you get down. You hear me—get down."

A thousand times Lea had thought of the joy it would give her to have a rifle in her hands and be able to turn it loose on Shreve and his crowd. Before she had been alone—and had not dared. But now, to fight beside this eagle-eyed man—the lean, avenging force that had trailed Shreve to a showdown. . . . She gripped her rifle tightly. When things opened up, she'd get in a shot or two!

From where she was crouched, Lea could not follow the progress of those approaching men. Her only index was the face of Dave Curtis. His mouth was like a steel trap, so fixed and grimly harsh was it, and his eyes were the coldest things Lea had ever seen. She knew little about men—little that was good. But she knew that in this man was an implacable purpose which could not be thwarted until either Tate Shreve or he lay dead.

A sudden sob ripped through Lea. She didn't want this man to die. Out of the mysterious desert he had ridden, to show her kindness and courtesy, the first that her starved little life had ever known. Vaguely she had dreamed of a man like this. No, it mustn't be he to die!

She knew that he had forgotten her presence, so deadly cold was his concentration on his task. With infinite care, Lea wriggled back up, close to him.

From there she could once more look out over the desert. She knew a quick shock. Shreve and his men were close, not over a hundred yards distant. They rode with the weariness of a night in the saddle, slouched low, hats pulled over their eyes. Tate Shreve was leading them, and behind him came Leeds and Sluefoot and Nigger George and Breed Fairchild, and the other four or five.

Inch by inch Lea edged her rifle up, until the cold stock nestled against her

cheek and the sights showed clearly.

The renegades came on steadily. Seventy-five yards away—then fifty. . . .

DAVE CURTIS reared to his full height. His voice, harsh and deadly, rang across the world.

"Shreve! This is Curtis. And I'm thinking of Buck Orland and his family. Drag 'em, you skunk! Drag—"

Then Dave Curtis's rifle opened up. Lea, almost stupefied by the stark, raw drama of the thing, saw Shreve throw up his head. She saw a snarl break over his face, saw him snatch at his guns. And then that rifle spoke, and a powerful blow smashed Shreve from his saddle.

After that, all was bewildered confusion. Lea's rifle kept pounding her shoulder in recoil, reminder that she was actually taking a part in this roaring battle. Twice, she saw horses collapse before her sights, and once a man tossed his hands up and fell backward.

Dave Curtis was a relentless machine. He killed Leeds and Sluefoot and Breed Fairchild. Every time he triggered, death touched another renegade.

What lead was thrown in return came from the guns of men bewildered and frenzied with fear. Those still in the saddle broke and rode for it. Nigger George was one of those, and Curtis's last shell piled him from his saddle.

Then it was all over. The surviving renegades were spurring madly into the desert. Lea knew they'd never return.

She heard spurs ring as Dave Curtis slithered down off the rock. "Stay put," he said. "There's a couple of crippled horses out there to be put out of misery."

She watched him stalk slowly out into the area of death. She saw him look at the sprawled figures. She saw him shoot a horse that was wounded. And then, up from behind a little clump of mesquite, she saw a man rise, lift a sixgun and aim carefully at Curtis's unsuspecting back.

Lea's scream of warning choked in her throat. Automatically she swung her rifle into line, looked down the sights and pressed the trigger. It seemed that these maneuvers took hours, yet all must have happened in a split second. For as her rifle snarled, she saw the renegade fall forward, driving the bullet intended for Curtis, harmlessly into the sand.

And then Lea dropped her rifle, put her face in her hands and began to sob wildly.

Presently a hand rested on her arm. She lifted her head. Dave Curtis was looking at her and his eyes were gentle.

"Thanks, little partner," he said simply. "Come along. The job is done. We're going away from here, you and me."

The sun came up as they walked back to the cabin, side by side. They untied Tom Anson, who was looking poisonous as a rattlesnake.

"Shreve," said Dave Curtis, "is dead. So are Leeds and Sluefoot and Nigger George and two or three others. The rest are gone. I'm riding out, myself—and I'm taking Lea with me. I'll see that word goes out that a rat named Tom Anson is hiding up here under the Black Rim. You may receive a visit from a sheriff one of these days. Take that as a warning, if you want to. I'm giving you that much of a break, because you gave Lea a home, such as it was."

He turned to Lea. "How long will it take you to get ready to ride, little partner?"

"I'm ready now," Lea told him breathlessly. "I'll ride anywhere you want—as far as you want, Dave."

His flashing smile was boyish. "Keno! That's a bargain. There's a lot of the world yonder across the desert. We'll look it over, you and me. And who knows what we'll find?"

"Who knows?" whispered Lea.

Maybe the desert knew, for it was still and peaceful again as they dipped down into its immeasurable red distances, riding stirrup to stirrup.

DESERT LOVE SONG

"You've done enough, dear." He looked down at her torn clothes, the deep scratches. "I'm goin' to take you home."

By Grace Isabel Sutherland

From out of the dread, all-destroying desert, an outlaw stumbled into Allene Brooks's hungry heart, for one short hour of Paradise. . . . Then a sheriff's posse leagued with the mighty forces of the sand-land—to crush the one dream in her life that had ever come true!

IT SEEMED to Allene that she couldn't bear it any longer, this dirge of the wagon, as she drove over the lonely desert. There was the crunch of wheels, with their creaking, dried-out spokes; the clank of empty water barrels;

the slog of hoofs in sand as the raw-boned old horse trudged along at his slow gait, pulling the ancient, lopsided wagon over the rutted road. All of it made a song of desolation as dreary as the undertone in her heart.

Even the calico sunbonnet, hiding her gold-brown hair, had a wilted air as it drooped over Allene's face. Her great brown eyes held hurt and bewilderment in their depths.

"I'll love Zeke," she whispered almost fiercely. "I've got to! He's good, fine—and he wants me. For dad's sake, I can do it." The soft lips quivered. "Only, I hadn't ever thought love would come—this way."

On she drove, with the sun hot on her shoulders, the dazzling reflection of its rays on the alkali sand almost blinding her. . . . Or it might have been the tears clinging to her long silken lashes that misted her sight.

Suddenly she dashed the tears away, stared at the sandy stretch ahead.

"Why," she cried aloud, "there's a cowboy afoot. He's hurt!"

Her hand tightened on the reins, and the horse quickened his pace. Wonderingly, she gazed at the tall, dusty figure, stumbling along, weaving back and forth crazily. She gasped out her alarm when he stopped, swayed, then sprawled in a grotesque heap in the sand.

She jerked the horse to a stop, scrambled swiftly over the wheel with her water canteen. The next instant she was kneeling beside the long, lean figure. Carefully, she pushed back the thick, fair hair, matted with blood. She found the ugly graze made by a bullet. It was not deep enough to be serious, but he must have lost a great deal of blood.

It took much of her precious canteen water to cleanse the wound, and she tore strips from her freshly ironed white petticoat to serve as dressings. That done, she gazed hopelessly down the deserted road. It might be hours—even days—before anyone else would pass this way.

"If only I could lift him into the wagon!" she murmured.

Then she heard his whisper. "A desert angel . . . lovely!"

STARTLED, she looked down at him, and a strange tingling sensation suddenly pulsed through every fibre of her being. His eyes were open, and Allene felt as if she were tumbling into blue seas, deep and magnetic. She caught up the canteen with trembling hands, held it tightly.

"An angel . . . in a red dress!" he breathed again.

She smiled then, tremulously, as she held the canteen to his lips. "No angel—only Allene Brooks. Now, if you could drink a little water. . . ." She couldn't go on, not with those blue eyes holding hers so completely that they took away her senses, made her breathless and a little frightened.

He drank eagerly, then sank back.

"Thanks," he said. "I—thought it was the end—but you saved me. You're good—sweet."

"I'm glad I happened along." Allene tried to keep her voice steady. "I'm on my way to the Circle Dot for water, and I'll take you with me. Zeke Harris will take care of you."

The stranger stared at her, and his blue eyes were suddenly almost black. His mouth grew grim, taut, but he tried to smile.

"Thanks, no," he said, "I'm headed the other way. My horse got scared threw me, and I've got to find him."

"But your wound! It may start bleeding again."

He shook his fair head. "I'll stay here," he said, "till I'm rested. You've bothered enough about me, desert angel."

By the square set of his jaw, she knew there was no use in arguing. She nodded,

stepped over to the wagon, pulled the tarpaulin from the water barrels.

"I'll put the canvas over this mesquite bush," she said. "It'll make a little shade. And I'll leave the canteen. But you must promise to stay here till I come back."

He grinned up at her, his wide mouth twisted in a way that tugged at her strangely. "I'll stay," he nodded, "for you're doggoned sweet, and I want to see you again, Allene Brooks."

"I'll bring Zeke to help you."

"No!" he rasped. "I'm askin' you, Miss Allene, not to mention to this Zeke—or to a livin' soul—that you saw me."

She met his gaze for a moment, puzzled, and again she had that feeling that she was tumbling into blue seas, joyous, filled with magic.

"All right," she nodded. "I'll not tell anyone."

Once again on the road, Allene was unmindful of the brassy sun beating down upon her shoulders, of the shifting sand-dunes, or the half-starved sagebrush. The whole world seemed different since the moment when she had looked into a wounded cowboy's blue eyes. She remembered his smile, his voice, the husky notes in it when he said, "You're doggonned sweet, and I want to see you again."

ALLENE came out of her reverie with a start, to find the old horse standing patiently before the hitchrack at the Circle Dot ranchhouse. Zeke's short, stocky figure was coming toward her.

"Why, Allene, honey!" he cried, his dark eyes alight. "You shouldn't've come through all this heat. I was aimin' to send water over to you this mornin.' Then things started happenin'—"

Tenderly, he lifted her to the ground, assigned a cowboy to fill her water barrels, while he led her into the pleasant, cool living room of the comfortable ranchhouse. He saw that she was seated comfortably in an easy chair, then brought a footstool and a tall glass of cool lemonade.

"Thanks, Zeke," she said gratefully. "Why are you always so good?"

"Why?" When she saw the fire in his dark face, she was almost sorry she had asked the question. "Do you need to ask, Allene? You know I love you—want you for my wife. I want to take you out of that hot desert hell. I want to do things for your father—give you happiness. Allene, how much longer must I wait?"

Part of her thoughts were reminding her that she had brought her answer now, that she was ready to take his love, his protection. But the rest of her was throbbing with memory of a pair of blue eyes, of a tanned young face, eager and haunting.

She shook her head. "Zeke, you're good, and I'm terribly grateful, but it wouldn't be fair—until I'm sure I love you."

He dropped to the footstool, took both her slim hands in his. "I'll make you love me, Allene, and I won't have to be worryin' about you out there alone, with a sick man for protection."

She smiled at that. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Zeke."

"Right now there's a killer runnin' loose on your part of the desert—an outlaw, with a price on his head."

"A killer?" she echoed.

He nodded, his thin lips drawn to a straight line.

"He tried to kill me last night. I took a shot at him, but he got away. It's Gordon MacLean, my old partner's nephew. You remember about him?"

"Yes—oh, yes!" She shuddered, remembering the man-hunt that had been going full-fledged when she and her father first moved to the desert. Gordon MacLean! The name came back, with sickening clearness. He had killed his uncle, robbed him, thrown his body into a deserted well. Two Mexican workers

had witnessed the act, ridden for help, or the murder might have gone undiscovered for years. Yet the killer had escaped.

"That young hellion," Zeke went on, "waylaid Dave on his way to town to bank our cattle money. The low-down polecat!"

Zeke stopped, his mouth a snarl. Blue veins knotted on his forehead. Allene knew a surge of pity for this man who had never stopped grieving over the untimely death of his old partner.

"And now," he rasped, "he's come back to put me out of the way, so's he'll get the ranch. Dave and I had the papers fixed that way, joint right of survivorship. He likely figgered some way to beat the law on that murder charge, and he'll be settin' pretty the rest of his life. But I've notified the sheriff. He ought to be here directly, with a posse."

Allene's breath came faster. She was remembering all at once the injured cowboy who had smiled at her and warmed her heart.

"This—Gordon MacLean?" she said, trying to control the tremor in her voice. "What is he like, Zeke?"

"A good-lookin' cuss, with light curly hair and blue eyes." Zeke leaned toward her. "Why are you askin', Allene?'

She pulled her hands from his, stood up. "Why—if I meet him, I want to know." But her eyes evaded his.

"That's so," he admitted. "Mebby I'd best ride along with you, honey."

"Oh, no. I'll be all right. You'll need to be here, when—when the sheriff comes." With shaking fingers, Allene tied on her sunbonnet, glanced out of the window to hide her nervousness. "The barrels are filled, and I must hurry back to dad. Don't worry about me, Zeke. I'm not at all afraid."

"I'm sorry if I upset you about this Gordon MacLean." His arm went about her, pulled her to him. "You know I want to look after you, don't you, Allene? And when this is all settled, you're goin' to let me love you?"

"I don't know!" she cried wildly. "Oh, you've got to wait."

"Of course, darlin'," he said gently, and his arm fell away. "I'm crazy for you, but your happiness comes first."

"You're good, so good," she choked. And as she walked beside him to the wagon, and he helped her into the seat, she had to fight back the tears that wanted to come.

"You'll be careful, Allene?" he asked anxiously.

"Of course. Goodbye, Zeke—and again, thanks."

Then she started back over the rutted trail to a blue-eyed cowboy, on whose fair head the law had set its price.

THE horse's pace was slow under the creaking load, and the water slopped back and forth in the big barrels. Sometimes it splashed over Allene's cotton dress, but she was not conscious of anything except the turmoil that seethed within her heart, like a heavy lashing storm.

"I hope he's gone," she told herself, and gripped the lines fiercely. "I don't want to see him again—ever."

Yet, as she reached the tarpaulin spread over the mesquite bush, she knew a sudden strange joy when she saw him sitting there, waiting.

"You—you're all right?" It wasn't at all what she had meant to say, but his answering smile warmed and thrilled her.

He nodded and began folding up the canvas. "Thanks for everything, miss. Now if I could just sight my cayuse."

"You still need care," she said slowly, her cheeks aflame and her brown eyes filled with golden lights. "I'd like my father to see that wound. Besides, you might sight your horse as we ride along. . . . And there's a kettle of frijoles at home."

He grinned at her. "I can't resist the

frijoles," he said, "and other things."

When he was on the wagon seat beside her, Allene again knew that tingling sensation his nearness brought. She had to steel herself to ask the thing she must know.

She turned, looked straight into his blue eyes. "You are—Gordon MacLean?"

"Yes," he said, then both were silent as they jolted along.

Again Allene spoke, forcing the words past rigid lips. "Zeke has notified the sheriff. He expects the posse soon."

"I might have known!" It was a bitter cry. "I was a fool to come back here, to think I could win out—with the cards life handed me. Not even a friend!"

"But I'm your friend, Gordon." Allene was almost frightened when she heard her own words. It was if someone else were speaking. She knew she was a traitor, knew she was forsaking Zeke's trust; but something stronger than herself was forcing her on.

It was a pulsing, magic instant. Gordon's hand caught hers, and Allene dropped the lines, while the old horse continued his steady plodding. Blue eyes met brown. Without warning, he had his arms about her, was holding her close. And Allene forgot Zeke. She forgot the dirge of the old wagon wheels, the burning sun on her shoulders, the desolate stretches of sand. She knew only that this moment held a bright little song of hope and joy—and ecstasy.

When his arms fell away from her, it was as if a knife were slashing at her very being.

"Darlin', you're sweet—sweet!" he cried out. "But I've got to keep away from you. I'm a hunted man."

"That doesn't matter. You're innocent!"

"How do you know?"

"Why—my heart told me." She smiled, and knew it was the truth.

"Allene, you trust me," he said, "and I'm goin' to be worthy of that trust. But until I've proved myself, I'm goin' to keep away from you, and you've got to help me, darlin'."

"Oh, Gordon, what does it matter?" she cried desperately. "If I know you're innocent. . . ." She laid her hand upon his arm.

"No, darlin'." Gently he took her hand from his arm, and smiled at her, a dazzling smile that dizzied her as she looked into the blue depths of his eyes. "You see, I love you. The minute I saw you, I knew you were the girl I've dreamed about, always. It isn't love at first sight, sweet—it's a life-time love. That's why I've got to protect you, Allene."

"Gordon, you've got to listen—" she began, but he shook his head.

"If you'll look to the right, Allene, you'll see a dark object movin' this way. It's a mighty pretty sight to me, honey, for I'm no longer a cowboy without a horse."

He gave a peculiar sharp whistle. "Blacky!" he called, and the horse tossed his black head, came running. The next minute he was trailing beside the wagon.

Gordon turned to Allene. "No need for the excess weight in your wagon now, honey. I can still ride." He leaned toward her.

For a moment she thought he was going to kiss her. She waited breathlessly. Then he turned away, climbed over the wheel, swung into the saddle.

"Now I have a horse—and a friend." He smiled at her. "Nothing can stop me."

"But don't leave me!" Allene cried in mock fear.

"You couldn't lose me, angel-in-a-red-dress," he grinned."

IN THE small, lean-to kitchen that afternoon, Allene and Gordon stood looking into each other's eyes. In the next room, Allene's father slumbered peace-

fully, unmindful of the turmoil in his daughter's heart.

"I love you, darlin'," Gordon told her. "That's way I'm ridin' over to see Zeke Harris, and shake the truth out of him."

"But you tried that last night, and he almost killed you!" she cried desperately. "He'd have the law on his side, could even claim the reward. Gordon, let's ride to meet the sheriff, make him believe you. Tell him about your uncle sending for you because he mistrusted Zeke, about his giving you the cattle money to bank for him. Tell him that Zeke hired the Mexicans—or forced them—to tell that lie about you. It's the only way, Gordon."

"It'd be a grand idea, honey," he smiled at her, "if I hadn't been fool enough to hide from the law. I wanted to settle things my own way—pay Zeke back, no matter what happened. But he kept himself too well guarded. I didn't have a chance. I'm goin' to talk to the sheriff, all right—*after* I've had my set-to with Zeke. Zeke's goin' to come clean, or—"

"Wait!" Allene caught his arm. "One of those Mexicans is working for us now. Zeke sent him over. I'll call him."

She went to the door. "Juan! Oh, Juan!"

There was no answer. Again she called, noted the grayness of the desert stretches that had taken suddenly an ominous look. She turned back. "He couldn't have gone far. I'll find him."

Gordon smiled, shook his head. "Not a chance, honey. A Mex sticks to his lies. Now I'm on my way. Kiss me, darlin'."

The next instant he was holding her tight in his arms, his lips upon hers, dizzying her, filling her heart with sweet, white flames. Then he was gone, hurrying toward his horse, riding away over the gray desert stretches. Allene stood in the doorway, watching, one hand pressed against her slender throat to still its pulsing.

A noise behind her made her turn. Juan stood there—a small, slender old Mexican with great drooping black mustaches.

"Sĕnorita, you weesh me?" he asked, bowing politely.

"Why didn't you come when I called?" she asked impatiently.

"I was veree busy, Señorita," he said, but his eyes shifted.

She caught both his arms, stared into his face. "You didn't want to see Gordon MacLean, because you knew you'd lied about him, made him a hunted man. He didn't kill his uncle—you know it! You lied, Juan!"

Juan's dark eyes were inscrutable. "I do not lie, Señorita. The fair one—he ees veree bad. He keel—"

"Listen, Juan! We've been kind to you. Kinder than Zeke Harris—you told me that."

"*Si,* Señorita."

"You said some day you would try to repay our kindness."

"*Si.* You are mos' good, Señorita, you and your *padre.* I am veree grateful."

"Then, Juan, tell the truth." Her words came in a fierce little rush. "I love Gordon MacLean, love him with all my heart. I don't want to go on living without him, and you could make me happy all the days of my life, if you would tell what really happened, Juan."

The Mexican stayed silent, then shook his head. "*No savvee,* Señorita."

"Oh, but you do understand! You're afraid of Zeke Harris."

Juan cringed, and Allene saw the fear in his eyes. In that moment, she knew Gordon was right. Juan would stick to his lies. She turned away, saw the distant dust-cloud that was moving in the direction of the Circle Dot. For a moment she stared.

"I think that's the sheriff's posse. I'm going to meet them before they reach Zeke! You stay with dad."

The last words were thrown over her shoulder as she ran toward the corral.

There was no time to change the hampering red dress, even had she thought of it.

Juan stumbled after her. "Señorita, do not go! There is a dust storm coming. The storm—she come queeckly, without warn'. You will die, Señorita!"

Allene paid no heed. Swiftly she saddled the horse, started down the sandy road, with Juan's incoherent babblings a blur in her ears. Better the law than Zeke's cruel viciousness! At least, Gordon would have a trial—a chance.

SHE gave the horse an unaccustomed lash with the quirt, sent him plunging into a miniature whirlwind that eddied and swirled about her, filling her eyes with dust, almost choking off her breath.

Then there was an ominous calm, when all nature stood still and waited. Juan was right. A storm was brewing—a dust storm that might keep her from reaching the sheriff, keep her from saving Gordon's life. Viciously she dug the rowels into the horse's sides. But in spite of all she could do, the animal was slowing down.

Again the uncanny stillness was broken, this time with a mighty roar that deafened her. The air was filled with flying sand and alkali dust. The road and desert plants, even the tall Joshua trees, were gradually obliterated in swirls of dust. Her throat felt closed up, her eyes burned. She drew up her neckerchief to keep the stinging alkali out of her nose. She couldn't go back. She had to go on.

Suddenly the horse refused to move, though she applied the quirt vigorously. With his back to the gale and his head lowered between his forelegs, he took the storm. Allene jumped down, threw the reins over his head and tried to pull him along. Her skirts whipped about her.

It was hopeless! Tears streamed down her dust-streaked face, only to be dried immediately by the searing wind. Dropping the reins in desperation and throwing the calico skirt over her head, she pitted her strength against the storm, afoot.

The wind increased in fury. She was continually thrown from her course. Road, horse, landmarks, all disappeared in the murky haze of the howling storm. Her arms and face were cruelly scratched as she was thrown with terrific force against an ocotillo. Cat-claw and buckthorn held her clothes in their spiny grip. As she jerked away, there was little left to protect her from the stinging, biting sand.

In her terror, she called, "Gordon, Gordon!"

She knew he must be miles away, yet her heart cried out for him.

It seemed like an eternity that she dragged herself onward, trying to keep her skirt over her nose and mouth. Then she bumped against something solid. Reaching out blindly, she clutched at it in wild desperation. A horse! She reached for the saddle, felt a familiar short stirrup. She had traveled in a circle!

With a sob, she clung in despair to the only stationary thing in a howling, shifting world. She wanted to stay there till the storm had passed. But Gordon might be killed! Zeke wouldn't hesitate to take advantage of an unarmed enemy.

She let go the stirrup, was immediately hurled away into a mad whirlwind of dust. She tripped over hummocks of sand verbena, stumbled to her knees, rose again. She sank again and again, as she tried to wade through the soft sand. Finally she fell and could not rise again. She was exhausted in every muscle.

THE calico skirt dropped from her burning face. The sand-filled air almost choked off her breath. She had failed Gordon. Nothing mattered now. She buried her face in her arms.

"Gordon!" she choked.

"Darlin'!" came an answer, borne on the roar of the wind.

She thought it was part of a dream. A blurred face appeared out of the dusty air.

Someone bent over her. She felt water on her face and lips. Her dazed mind tried to understand the words that poured into her ears. "Allene! Allene, honey!"

Her thirst-parched lips met his. She was swept into his arms. It was so sweet just to rest there. As if in sympathy, the wind ceased its incessant roar and came only in fitful gusts. The desert had forgotten its fury—only the gray sky and a haze in the air remained.

Suddenly she started up. "The sheriff! I must find him!"

Gordon drew her toward him. "You've done enough, dear." He looked down at her torn clothes, the deep scratches. "I'm goin' to take you home. That's all that's important now."

Gently he released her, brought up the horses, helped Allene back into the saddle. Slowly they picked their way over buried cactus plants, among new sand dunes, their mounts close together.

"How did you find me, Gordon?"

He grinned. "I saw a speck of red in the distance—and the storm was comin'. So I made a bee-line through the dunes to you."

"You're so dear, Gordon!"

Her eyes widened. The posse was moving toward them. She spurred her weary horse ahead, straight to the group of riders, led by the grizzled old sheriff.

Allene rode up to the sheriff, leaned toward him. "Before you do anything you regret," she cried out, "you've got to know Gordon MacLean is innocent. I have evidence—"

"You're crazy!" she heard Zeke's voice; then she saw him, his face twisted with rage as he rode toward her.

"It's the truth," she panted. "Sheriff, you've got to listen to Gordon. You've—"

"Where's your proof?" rasped Zeke, before the sheriff could speak. "Give us one reason why we shouldn't shoot him!"

She saw Gordon riding toward them, saw Zeke's hand hovering near his holster. And she had no proof!

A shout came suddenly above pounding hoofs. "Señorita!"

And Juan and Gordon rode into their midst. Angrily, the posse closed around them.

"I tell!" Juan cried. "Señor Harris, he keel me—but I tell!"

Zeke's lips twitched, his hand nervously covered his gun, as he wheeled on the little Mexican.

"Shut up, you fool!" He turned a livid face to the sheriff. "Are you goin' to listen to a lyin', yellow-bellied greaser?"

The sheriff spoke sternly. "Go on, Juan."

"It was not Señor MacLean throw old boss in well—I swear. It was Señor Harris. He—he keel me. . . . Juan no care. The Señorita, she love Señor MacLean."

ZEKE'S hand shot out, and hazy sunlight gleamed on shining steel. A scream rasped Allene's throat.

In that instant, Gordon leaped from the saddle, took Zeke with him to the ground, rolling and struggling. Zeke fought to free his right hand, but Gordon had it in a vise-like grip that forced the fingers to open and drop the gun in the dusty road. A deputy sprang forward and jerked the begrimed Zeke to his feet.

The sheriff said soberly, "It looks as if you have proved your own guilt, Harris."

"As for you," turning brusquely to Gordon, "I'll have to take you back, too." He cleared his throat. "But it'll take a minute or two to get started."

With a wink, the sheriff turned away and jerked his thumb at the others to go ahead a little. Gordon swung around to Allene's side. His arm went around her tightly, almost lifting her from the saddle. She raised a radiant face to his, and their lips met.

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK

IN THE hurry of preparing that first trailside dinner last month, it wasn't possible to discuss the various types of camp stoves, nor the cooking utensils and dishes. With "Mulligan" on the current menu, we'll go a bit further into the fire question.

Either of the longer-burning, primitive types described in the March issue, will serve for cooking stews. But it is mighty convenient to have an iron or wire grid on hand. This serves not alone as a range top, to support your kettle, but is a perfect broiler as well. The grid is of oblong shape, and may be obtained in various sizes up to about eighteen by twenty-five inches. Some are provided with folding legs; others may be supported at each corner by stones, or with the parallel logs. The de luxe grids are constructed with enclosed sides and back, to shut off the wind and concentrate the heat. Any of these will simplify cooking in the open considerably and save the spilling of many a pot of coffee!

Now for Cedar Bill's Mulligan, the proportions carefully figured out with much frowning and tugging at his red hair. He is an old-time Wyoming cowpuncher, and his recipe for Mulligan is the best yet. . . .

If you are using an iron kettle, put in a tablespoonful of drippings, heating till it almost sizzles. In this, brown two or three pounds of beef cut medium small. If you have only an enamel pot, brown the meat in your frying pan, then put it in that pot, salt and pepper thoroughly, and add two or three large onions, sliced thin, or a dozen small white ones, whole. Pour in two quarts of boiling water.

Next, throw in two handsful, or one standard sized cup full, of dried beans (lima, Navy, or pinto, but *not* kidney beans) and a cup full of canned tomatoes. Let this mixture simmer until the meat lacks about a half hour of being thoroughly tender, then put in five medium sized potatoes, cut into eighths. It's a very good idea to cook this early in the day, reheating at mealtime. The longer the Mulligan stands, the richer the flavor.

WHEN Bill was in a real culinary mood, he'd add dumplings.

For those—Take two standard cups of flour, and into them thoroughly mix two teaspoonsful of baking powder and one of salt. Then work in a rounded tablespoon of butter or other shortening, adding enough cold water, or half water and half evaporated milk, to form a dough soft enough to be dipped out by the spoon-

ful, like a small biscuit. Drop it thus, a bit at a time, into the cooking Mulligan, popping the cover on quick, so that not a bit of the steam may escape. Keep it that way, don't even peep, for fully ten minutes. Then off with the cover—and look at the fluffy dumplings!

During this process, if you fear the stew may cook on, shake the kettle occasionally. And, of course, do not permit violent boiling, over the hottest part of the fire.

By the way, quite by accident I discovered—one day when unexpected company came riding into my camp on the Zuni trail, and I hadn't much to offer them—that this dumpling mixture makes a dandy pudding top. Add a tablespoonful of sugar to the dough, then spread it over the top of a pan of sliced apples, which have been sugared and dusted lightly with nutmeg. When the crust is baked sufficiently, which will be within fifteen minutes—usually—turn the pudding from the pan, with the fruit on the top. This tastes pretty luscious.

Did you know that you can get a dandy little baker, one that will fold compactly, at a small cost? The top and bottom slope from the opened front to the center of the rear, which is supported by metal legs. In this, you can do a lot of baking, with the open front to the fire. And you can move it forward or back, according to the amount of heat desired. These bakers are made of tin or aluminum. Personally, I prefer the latter.

Of course, there is always that tried and true friend—the Dutch oven. It is my favorite, and is perfectly convenient, unless the weight of the pack must be kept down.

Never will I forget my introduction to Dutch oven cookery. I rode in to the chuck wagon at noon, with some fifteen or twenty cowboys who'd been rounding up cattle on the old S.M.S. Ranch in Texas. On the ground near the fire, were several of those odd looking iron pots. The cook whisked off the covers and *ummmm!* what fragrance poured out to tease our palates!

If you've never tasted brown-crusted biscuits or meat that's fairly oozing with rich juices, cooked in a Dutch oven, you've certainly missed something. It makes me hungry just to think of one of these funny iron pots, its depressed cover filled with red hot coats, more of 'em piled about the sides, and the makin's of a whacking good dinner in the well-greased interior.

Thinking of weights reminds me that, with the exception of the folding oven, aluminum utensils are generally less satisfactory than enamel, while the iron or steel frying pan is by far the better type. All camp dishes should be selected with care, since their number is necessarily limited and they must be put to so many more purposes than a single dish would in a well equipped kitchen at home. Always bear that in mind.

Next time we'll consider a quick, hot lunch for one of those times when you come in so hungry you just can't wait for food to cook—and don't want a heated-up can of beans.

Oh, yes—and there's that appetite-satisfying old standby, "Bean Hole Beans"—most delectable of all bean dishes—a fine one for a beginning camp cook. That's another for next time.

—By Myrtle Juliette Corey.

The next installment of* Rangeland Romances' "*Trailside Cookbook*" *—with its first-hand tips by an experienced outdoor cook—will appear in the May issue. . . . Out March 25th!

A novelette of rangeland feudists—in love

When a cowgirl's beau turns traitor to his own kind, and sides a sheep-herding invader, she can either win him back to his senses or fight at his side. . . . But when that invader was a girl, trespassing on Happy Bell's love as well as her land, it called for a new brand of courage—that would turn Happy's joy into an eternity of loneliness!

CHAPTER ONE

Strangers at Heartbreak Canyon

DIMPLES flashed in Happy's softly tanned cheeks as she watched her grandfather mount. Charley Bell was only going from the corral to the house, but he never walked a single bandy-legged step when he could ride the distance. At the house, he would tie his horse to the porch rail, to save the few feet in from the hitchrack.

He turned in the saddle, a grin twisting his round face to dimples as deep as Happy's own. "Hell!" he drawled, one hand pulling at an end of his long, drooping mustaches. "You don't need to be lightin' out in such a damn rush, just because Doc Mike happens to be a mite late. That hoss ain't ailin' very bad. Reckon I could have drenched him myself, only you was so set on findin' an excuse to get that vet up to the Dinner Bell."

Happy laughed, turned Velvet, her black mount, into the lane and urged him to a run. It didn't matter that her grandfather knew how much she loved Mike Donovan. It didn't matter if the whole range knew. It was the most important

LOVE ME— LOVE MY SHEEP!

By Isabel Stewart Way

She knew that the war was over. She knew that she had saved Elena—for Mike.

thing in the world, anyhow . . . because it was the thing that made the sun so warm and golden upon the earth, that set the moon and the stars in the sky!

The lane twisted into the valley trail, and Happy's heart beat faster. She ought to meet Mike any minute, now. He was never very late, but she was glad he had delayed a bit today. It gave her this excuse to meet him, to have a few moments alone with him, as they rode back together. Happy's gray eyes shone with little golden lights at the prospect. Her hand trembled as she lifted it to push back the clinging

yellow curls that plastered her forehead.

But the smile faded and her eyes darkened with dread, as the trail abruptly circled out on Sheepman's Rock—a flat boulder that overlooked small Shadow Canyon. Happy always dreaded this spot in the trail, for never could she forget the day, years before, when she had stood here, a terror-stricken child, staring down at her father—dead, from a sheepman's bullet.

Today the memory came back clearer than ever, filling her with dread, chilling the joy about her heart. An evil cloud seemed to settle over the warm, golden afternoon, and Happy spoke abruptly to the black. She wanted to get on, past this spot . . . On to Mike.

Then she heard it—the horrible sound that the shoulder of the hill and the down-blowing wind had kept away from their ears, up at the Dinner Bell Ranch.

She stopped Velvet again, sat rigid in the saddle, refusing to believe. But it was true! She was actually hearing the bleating of sheep! Sheep in Chula Valley, where they had been but twice before, in all history! And always their coming had meant bloody range war, with death for men like Happy's father.

The dimples were gone from Happy's cheeks now; her sweet mouth was a hard-held line. Her eyes grew steely, flashing with the hatred that was her heritage. The sound came from just beyond the mouth of Shadow Canyon, from a rocky strip that was actually on Dinner Bell property; for the great ranch, itself, was like a shawl thrown over the upper heights of the Baby Sis—smallest of the Seven Sister Mountains—and trailing down its slope to this rocky strip at the edge of Chula Valley.

SHEEP on the Dinner Bell! Happy spurred Velvet around the shoulder, to gaze upon the scene. She saw the herders' camp first: an old covered wagon drawn up under the shade of a stunted oak, and a delapidated tent close by. A fire blazed in a pit of rocks, and a kettle gave off the odor of cooking mutton. Happy's nostrils quivered in contempt.

Her eyes went to the despised woolies—a small band that grazed eagerly at the sparse grass among the rocks, under the watchful eye of a gaunt sheep dog. And then, as her gaze went beyond, her eyes widened, and bewildered lights came into the smoky grayness of them.

Mike was there! Mike Donovan! He was talking with somebody—a slight figure in faded overalls and a shabby felt hat. A very young boy, Happy thought, until a thin hand reached up, took off the hat—to let two long, heavy dark braids tumble down.

A girl! A strange band tightened about Happy's throat as she saw the way Mike was looking down at her from his tall, lanky height. Once he laughed, and the girl said something. Happy couldn't hear their words, but the girl's voice drifted up to her, even above the hated sheep-sounds. It was an utterly lovely voice, as low-pitched as some of the deeper notes on Charley Bell's fiddle; its very loveliness frightened Happy.

Then Mike reached out and caught the girl's hand, while he spoke, tensely and gravely. Happy couldn't bear it a moment longer. Wheeling Velvet, she sent him recklessly down the trail, then across the rocky wasteland, toward the sheepherder's camp.

The clatter of Velvet's hoofs stirred the camp alive. A woman emerged from the tent. She came running, one hand holding a shotgun, the other clutching at her full, long black calico skirts. Black eyes flashed from under a slat sunbonnet.

"Stop where ye be!" she called. "Ain't nobody comin' hell-bent into here!"

"Wait, Aunt Patience!" It was the lovely voice of the girl.

She came close, looked up at Happy, from brown eyes too large for her pinched, pale face. A sullen face it was, and there was storm in the depths of that gaze, and in the tight set of the mouth.

"What is it you want?" she demanded.

"I want—" Happy began spiritedly, then stopped, as Mike came forward, his loose-jointed, gangly body seeming longer than ever, beside the two sheep women.

Happy knew what she wanted, though she dared not voice it. She wanted Mike, wanted to take him away from here . . . till after this girl and her sheep had gone far, far away.

"Happy!" Mike cried, coming up to her. "Happy, I'm glad you came. This is Elena Kruger." He reached out, caught the girl's hand, while he smiled up at Happy. "And her Aunt Patience. We've got to work something out before Charley gets wind of this."

Happy's breath was a pain in her throat, at sight of Mike, holding the other girl's hand. "They'd better move on before Gramp finds out," she cried. "He isn't friendly to sheep folks."

"An' if he's a cowman, we ain't nowise friendly to him!" the older woman retorted grimly. "Nor to his devil's spawn, if you want to know!"

"WAIT a minute," Mike put in, his lips smiling, but his blue eyes grave. "There's no use for hard words, Happy. It won't solve things." He rested his big hand for a moment upon hers. "Let's you and I ride on toward the Dinner Bell. We can have a little talk."

He whistled, and his gray horse, Dusty, came up to him. Mounting, Mike took off his hat, smiled a goodbye to the two women, then he and Happy rode off together.

They rode in silence, letting the horses pick their careful way across the rocky strip. Then they turned into the up-trail that led to the Dinner Bell Ranch. A little way above the valley, where the trail widened to a small flat, Mike reached out for Velvet's bridle rein, stopped both horses.

He sat there for a moment, looking gravely at Happy. She gazed back, seeing every dear familiar line of his lean face: the high cheek bones, the deep-set, dark blue eyes, that had smiled at the girl, Elena, but were so gravely regarding herself now.

"Why did you do it?" Happy finally choked out. "Why did you go there?"

"For the same reason you went—because I heard the sheep," he replied. "And because I knew it might mean war."

"Did you tell them they had to go? That they couldn't stay here—in Chula Valley?"

"Honey, I meant to. But when I got there, I found they can't move on for a spell. That band of sheep, they're ewes, and about to lamb. They're trail-worn and half-starved. If they were pushed on now, even a little way, most of them would die."

Happy stared at him wonderingly. In all her life, she had never before heard anyone speak of the needs of sheep. And now to hear it from Mike!

"And besides the ewes," Mike went on, "there's some deeper tragedy in that camp. I didn't see Elena's father, but there's somethin' hangin' over those two women. It shows in their faces, and in the girl's voice." He was silent an instant; and, vividly, Happy recalled the poignant beauty of Elena Kruger's voice. "I—I couldn't tell them to move on, Happy."

The pain at Happy's throat was an unbearable thing, lashing her to anger. All the turbulent emotion within bubbled up in words.

"Just because that girl has a nice voice, you weakened. You're willing to let her stay, to start another range war! Willing to risk having my grandfather killed, our neighbors and friends—all because of a sheep-girl!" Happy's voice broke on a sob, and the weakness of it drove her to greater anger.

"You can't throw us into another range war!" she choked. "I'm going to get Gramp. The outfit will drive them out Chula before the others know."

Through the mist of her tears, she saw Mike dismount, come over to her. She felt his arms about her, lifting her down. And then he was holding her close, tight against his heart. For a moment, she could do nothing but sob against his shoulder, clinging to him, while she tried to make herself know it wasn't true that Mike was protecting the sheep girl.

His hand stroked her hair, then she felt his lips against her cheeks . . . and, at last, against her mouth. Under the spell of that kiss, she forgot her bitterness for a time. She forgot the big-eyed girl with the long dark braids, down at the sheep-camp; forgot everything except the surge of emotion that swept through her, under the spell of his lips . . . and left her helpless.

WHEN Mike drew a little away, so that he could look deeply into her gray eyes, she had no defense against his request.

"Happy, darlin', I want you to promise you won't tell your grandfather or any of the boys." His voice was quiet, but husky. "They'll all find out soon enough. But I may have time to work things out. Please, Happy, sweet!"

Her eyes widened. The golden lights in them went out, like flames hidden by dusky smoke clouds. She tried to think what the promise would mean, but she couldn't. She only knew that whatever Mike asked of her, she had to give. . . . And now it was this promise.

"All right," she whispered brokenly. "I'll not tell, Mike. I promise."

"Thanks, darlin'." He kissed her again, before he lifted her to the saddle.

Happy slowly rode out to the trail, turned toward the Dinner Bell, but Mike did not follow.

"I'll be up a little later, honey," he called after her. "But first, I've got to talk to Elena again."

Then, with a wave of his hand, he turned Dusty back down the trail. A minute later, Happy saw him riding over the rocky strip toward the sheep camp. She couldn't watch any more. With a little cry, she urged Velvet on, around terrible Sheepman's Rock—the grim monument to the last deadly sheep war—and on home.

"I've got a headache," she told fat Conchita, who was bustling about, filling the house with rich odors of cooking food. "I'm going to lie down."

"*Si,* you get nice rest, *querida.*" The gold bangles in the Mexican woman's ears twinkled as she nodded emphatically. "The young cayuse doctor, he weel stay for the supper. And tonight he weel weesh to make ride with you under the moonlight. So you must be rest', my little one."

"I don't think he'll be here for supper," Happy said slowly, her desperate hands pushing back the clustering ringlets of her yellow hair. "I don't think—he'll stay."

Then, because she could hold back the stinging tears no longer, Happy ran through the hall, and into her own room—the one place where she could be alone—to sob out her grief and pain.

She was right. Mike Donovan didn't stay for supper.

"Had some right important business som'ers else," her grandfather told her, at the table. "Soon's he'd drenched the hoss, he lit a shuck out of here. Hell, there must ha' been a hull epizootic busted loose down in Chula Valley, to call him back that fast!"

CHAPTER TWO

Midnight Warning

HAPPY didn't have to keep her secret long. She was lying in bed that night, still sobbing out some of the grief and

fear that held her, when she heard her grandfather's voice in the hall outside.

"Hellity-dam cripes!" he boomed. "Of all the cussed devil-tricks to play on an honest man! Of all the dad-gum almighty times to start raisin' hell! Of all—"

Quickly, Happy slipped out of bed, drew a blanket about her slim shoulders and hurried out to Charley Bell.

"Gramp, what in the world!"

At any other time in her life, Happy would have laughed aloud at the plump little man who stood there, nightshirt stuffed into trousers, the laces still dangling from his high boots, while he belligerently buckled on his gun belts.

"I reckoned first-off I was havin' a helluva nightmare," he roared, jerking up his head, with its gray cap of crinkly curls, to glare at Happy from deep-set, bushy-browed eyes. Even his fierce handlebar mustaches waggled in anger. "I woke up, cussin' Conchita for givin' me the second half o' that apple pie—when I heard it again!"

"Heard what, Gramp?" Happy faltered, but already she knew his answer.

"Sheep!" The word was a roaring blasphemy as it fell from little Charley's lips. "There's blasted sheep a-blattin' 'round here, sure's the devil's a hog! I can smell 'em, besides! And if the Lord'll just give me strength to stand the stench of them long enough, I'm goin' to dig 'em out!"

He grabbed his old Stetson and was out of the door, leaving Happy staring, wide-eyed, after him. She heard his voice again on the porch, cursing the vile luck that would drag a man out in the night and make him walk all the way from the porch to the corrals, to get himself a horse. And then his anger was a trailing rumble of sound, mingled with the clink of his spurs, as he made his bandy-legged way down the path.

A moment longer, Happy stood, her fear growing overwhelmingly. Range war couldn't be stopped now, not if they refused her grandfather's demands that they leave. Little Charley would be a part of it. And what had happened to his son—Happy's father—so long ago, might happen to the old man now.

Mike had known what it would mean, if the sheep stayed in Chula Valley. He had gone down to warn them. But after he had seen the brown-eyed, sullen Elena, he had forgotten his friends, his own kind. He had risked bringing war upon them.

A sob filled Happy's throat. Running back to her room, she jerked on her clothes. As she ran for the corrals, she saw her grandfather riding away.

Never before had Velvet's riding gear been thrown on so quickly, so carelessly. Only a moment later, Happy was riding down the trail, fear in her heart—and a terrible aching pain.

The air was full of bleating now, and when Happy caught up with her grandfather at Sheepman's Rock, where he had stopped his horse, she comprehended the reason. The woolies had been moved up into Shadow Canyon. And Shadow Canyon was the place where the sheepmen had entrenched themselves before, when they had snuffed out the life of Happy's father.

SHADOW CANYON was a natural fortress. A blind canyon, its smooth rocky sides were scooped out at the lower part, like a squat, round-bottom bottle. Under the ledge thus formed, the sheep could be folded, for a stream of water came down in a thin fall from the creek on the Dinner Bell. And that overhanging ledge and its perpetual shadows gave good hiding place for watching sheepmen to lie in wait for cowmen.

After a long moment, Charley opened his mouth: "The damned buzzards! The—"

He stopped, his fury too great for utterance, and went clattering down the trail. His very silence frightened Happy more than cursing could have done.

He didn't realize, in his wrath, that Happy was riding beside him, until he came up to the narrow mouth of the canyon, stopped in a shower of dirt and gravel.

"Come out of there!" he boomed, both guns drawn. "Hop out of there, you yaller-gizzarded sons of lizards! Come out, an' see how we treat scaley-bellied varmints that creep in by night! I'll—"

He stopped, and stared, slack-jawed, as Patience Kruger stood suddenly before him, gun in hand, black eyes gleaming, every line of her gaunt, thin frame showing hostility.

"Git away from here, ye half-pint cattle-louse!" she said in a shrill voice packed with tension. "If ye don't, I'll blast yer ornery old soul loose from yer mangy carcass."

Charley Bell's round face was livid with fury, as he holstered his gun. He could do no less, in a quarrel with a woman. But he made no move to ride away, even in face of the shotgun.

Happy rode up, caught his arm. "Gramp, you can't do this alone. You can't—"

"Like hell, I can't!" he roared. "In spite of their gol-dummed pink-tied tricks, sendin' a slab-sided old she-crow to cut in on a man's fight, they'll find out it don't work. Stop holdin' me, Happy, or I'll swat you! I never done it yet, but I will, by damn! I'm goin' in there an' drag out what passes for a male among sheepherders . . . an' have it out with the snake."

Jerking loose from the girl, he rode straight toward Patience Kruger.

She lifted the gun unwaveringly. "Come any closer, an' I'll shoot!"

Charley still rode slowly toward her.

Happy screamed, spurred Velvet in from the side. There was another shout —from Mike, who was riding toward them swiftly. And riding behind Mike, clinging to him with both hands, was the girl, Elena! Happy's breath caught in her throat, and the world swayed dizzily under this new pain. Mike and Elena, together again—working together, planning together! Suddenly she knew why Mike had asked her not to tell her grandfather. He had wanted him to move Elena and her people here, where they would be safe, if war came!

ELENA slid to the ground, turned, and for an instant her sullen gaze met Happy's. Hatred seemed to quiver in the very air. Then the girl went over to her aunt, took the gun.

Mike sat in the saddle, staring at Charley Bell. "Listen, Charley," he said, "you don't want to start any trouble now."

"I want these damned varmints out of here with their range-lice!" Charley roared back. "They better move, hell-a-tootin', or—"

"We're stickin', doodlebug!" Patience Kruger bawled out. "Ain't no polecats goin' to run us from pillar to post no more!"

"You ain't stickin' here!" Charley boomed. "Ruinin' good range—"

"Your range won't be ruined, Charley, and you know it," Mike broke in. "There's not enough feed here to tempt cows, but it's like manna to these half-starved woolies. And there's water in the canyon —for the lambin' that's goin' to start, right soon. Anyway," he went on, "you can't drive these women away, Charley. They're worn out. They—"

"Ain't there anythin' that passes for men?" Charley shouted.

Elena Kruger jerked up her head, with the two long dark braids. "Yes, there's my father!" she said, in her low, vibrant tones. "He's with us, and when he sees you—"

"Why ain't he here?" Charley demanded. "Just like a stinkin' sheepman, hidin' behind a female's skirts!"

There was a moment's silence, then Mike turned to the dark-eyed girl. "Maybe you'd best call out your father," he

said tiredly. "It's easier for men to settle things between 'em, than to have to deal with women. I'll get him."

Elena's face had grown white. "I told you before that nobody's goin' to wake him," she said tensely. "He's tired, handling these sheep alone, all the way!"

"I reckon he's drunk, sleepin' it off," Charley guessed. "Well, a drunk, lousy sheepherder's as good as a sober one. Fetch him out, by the great snortin' whinnies, or—"

Elena was already beside Charley's horse. Her too-big eyes burned with angry fires as she looked up at him.

"My father's not coming," she said, in slow, striking emphasis. "And, drunk or sober, he can always hit a cowman—even at a hundred yards."

She stepped back, turned a little, and they followed her gaze. The firelight flickered on the covered wagon, to show up the evil-looking gun-barrel that was stuck through a loop in the canvas. For a moment, Happy got a glimpse of a bearded face peering through, of gleaming, dark eyes above the gun-sights. The gun wavered, came steadily to rest—aimed at Charley Bell.

"Charley!" Mike cried sharply, riding before him. "Take Happy out of this. You can't start a fight, when it'll mean women gettin' hurt. There's nothin' you can do."

"Nothin' I can do?" Charley echoed, his loud voice choking with the rage that filled him. "Nothin'? Well, if I can't, by damnity hell, all Chula can! If these jackals ain't out of here by this time tomorrow, it'll be war! And we'll know goldanged well which side you're on, you slatty turn-coat coyote!"

"You'll find me here," Mike returned steadily, "with shootin' irons."

Cursing, Charley turned away. Happy started to follow, but Mike came alongside.

"Happy, darlin'," he said, his voice starting anew the great, growing pain in her heart, "you've simply got to understand."

Happy turned. Her gray eyes, with the golden fires all gone from them, rested a moment upon Elena Kruger, then came back to Mike. For a long moment she looked at him, as if she would etch every line of his face upon her heart, to carry with her forever. And then, she couldn't see him—because of the burning tears that were there.

"I understand," she whispered fiercely, then spurred Velvet after her grandfather, who was mumbling his helpless rage at having to battle with women folks.

Happy paid no heed. Range war or peace, it didn't matter very much. Nothing could ever matter much again . . . nothing except the throbbing pain in her heart.

CHAPTER THREE

Lover's Choice

HAPPY didn't want to go with Charley Bell to Sun-Dance that next afternoon, but he insisted.

"It ain't good, stayin' by yourself, at a time like this," he told her awkwardly. "I know you feel like the end of the danged world's come, with Mike showin' what a cussed fool he is. But, hell, honey, you got a life yet to live!"

"I know," she said gravely. That was the trouble. She had a life to live, and nothing to live it with but dead memories.

"Don't forget how to smile, Happy, gal." Little Charley peered at her anxiously. "Why, first time I ever laid eyes on you, when you warn't more'n ten minutes old, you twisted that damned cute mouth of yourn, an' made dimples, an' then and there I named you Happy. Nothin'd be right around the old Dinner Bell if you forgot how to smile."

"I won't forget, Gramp," she promised, and forced her rigid lips into the desired smile.

So, because she knew it would make Charley happier, she rode down to Sun-Dance with him that afternoon. As they came down the trail to the valley, they heard the sheep in the canyon below, but neither mentioned them. Happy kept her eyes away from the spot, and Charley stared straight ahead, his Adam's apple shuttling up and down, as he choked back the profanity bottled up within him.

The news had reached Sun-Dance, they realized, as they rode down the single dusty street. Men were gathered in groups, talking in angry tones. The saloons were crowded, but no gayety spilled out. Everywhere was grimness, hatred.

Happy waited in the hotel parlor, after her shopping was done. Her heart filled with bitterness as she thought of Elena Kruger, whose coming had brought strife back to the valley, heartache to Happy, and trouble to the young Sun-Dance veterinary, Doctor Mike Donovan.

For people were blaming Mike. They already knew that he was on the side of the sheep folks. From time to time, as angry voices drifted into the hotel parlor from the saloon next door, Happy heard Mike's name mentioned, and fear filled her.

She went to the parlor door, saw that the door across the hall—the one that opened directly into the saloon—had been left partly open. It was through here the voices came.

She slipped into the hall, listened. Her grandfather and a number of other cowmen were in there. Jared Elder, the red-headed editor of the Sun-Dance Bugler, was talking vehemently.

"I never thought it of Donovan," he said. "Encouragin' those woolies to stay in Chula, when he knows what it may mean! If we can't get them out peaceably, it'll start war in the valley, and we've had too much war."

"We'll get 'em out," another loud voice said glumly. "They's jest one way to deal with a lousy sheepherder. That's to fill him full of lead, an' leave him to p'izen the buzzards. The sooner we git at it—"

"There are women to deal with, in this case," Jared Elder reminded him. "You can't fight women."

"Sheep women don't hardly count, anyhow. They're only half human."

"Yeah!" broke a voice Happy recognized as that of Twill Queezy, an irascible Chula Valley rancher. "We can put the women in their wagon, an' start 'em on. Keep the men to deal with, along with Doc Mike. He's got somp'n comin' to him, too, 'pears to me."

There was a chorus of angry assent that made Happy's heart pound with terror, for Mike. She heard the young red-headed editor plead for a peaceful settlement, to avoid a real range war, and she heard their grim refusals.

THEN her grandfather spoke. "Now listen here, you damn rannahans!" little Charley roared. "You're hornin' in on my private war! Them lice are on my land this minute! It's my ears that the blattin' of them varmints has been pesterin', an' my nose that thinks some hellish plague has struck it. An' last of all," with a betraying note of huskiness, "you'll recollect I lost my only son by a sheepman's bullet. So I feel I got some rights—the right to pot these Krugers loose, myself!"

"How?" Twill Queezy asked.

"I got ways. I guarantee they'll be kitin'-to-hell on!"

"How about Doc Mike?" Twill demanded.

"Go with 'em, I reckon." Charley drew a deep sigh, and Happy knew he was thinking of her, of her heartache. "Mike's sweet on the Kruger gal, anyhow. That's why he throwed in with the scum."

Out in the empty hall, Happy leaned against the wall, her eyes closed to hold back the scalding tears, her hands clenched until the nails bit her palms. The arguing

voices in the saloon fell dully upon her ears. She was too busy fighting her own heartache, her own pain. She had to fight it through, had to be able, in some way, to help Mike.

At last she heard Twill Queezy's voice, speaking reluctantly. "All right then, Charley. You can have till tomorrow night. We'll all ride up at sundown. If the polecats are gone, we'll go on up to your Dinner Bell and have a party. If they're still pollutin' Chula air . . . we'll have a party, anyhow, with the Krugers as sort of chief guests, wearin' neckties. It'll be easy. Both deputies went up to Bridal Veil Mines tonight, to guard a heavy shipment of gold out the other way tomorrow. So you'd best shoo them sheepies out, Charley, or we'll do it for you."

"They'll be gone, by cripes!" Charley shouted, and Happy then heard his short steps coming toward the hall.

He found her there, and comprehended at once the poignant hurt he saw in her white, stricken face. He caught her shoulders with a tight grasp.

"Brace up, Happy, gal!" he whispered huskily. "Damn it to hell, everything's goin' to be all right! Didn't you hear me promise it? Why, I'm goin' right down to the general store an' order a ton of grub, so's Conchita can bake up her messes for the danged party tomorrow night. Them dirty, ill-begotten Krugers'll be gone 'fore then."

Happy nodded, forcing a smile, but not trusting herself to speak. Then, mutely, she followed him to the store, helped order the things Conchita would need for the baking. She did it all as if in a horrible dream, for her heart was throbbing out one painful question after another.

What about Mike? If the Krugers left, would Mike go with them? If he did, how could Happy go on living? If he stayed, how could she bear it, knowing his heart had gone with Elena?

AFTER the early supper, Charley and his outfit went to work. Happy understood his plan then. Baby Shoe Creek poured, in a short waterfall, down into Shadow Canyon, to run through the rocks and out into the valley. Due to a long drought, the creek was only a thin stream now. It would be an easy matter for Charley Bell to dam it.

"The hellions'll be lost without water," he told Happy, as she rode up to watch. "Shut the creek off, an' the slaverin' muck'll have to move on."

Happy's eyes darkened as she stared into the pool already beginning to form behind the growing dam.

She was remembering the gravity of Mike's tone when he spoke of the lambing, as if it were something important. He had made it more important than Happy, herself. . . . Or perhaps it was Elena Kruger who meant so much.

"They'll hitch them flea-bit mules an' git!" Charley boomed on. "An' that smart-alec young vet'll see we mean business, by gum!"

Then, as he remembered Happy's pain, he looked at her anxiously. "You won't go on grievin', honey, if Doc Mike goes with them hog-wash Krugers? Not over a worthless skunk of a sheep-befriendin' coyote, like him. You see," he went on, "it's best Mike should go. Folks are powerful worked up ag'in him. Even our own boys—" he nodded toward the working cowhands "—are rarin' to ride down there and fill his damned carcass with lead."

Happy looked over at the grim-faced men, saw the hostile guns buckled on each one. It would take little to start them shooting, she knew, for a cowman's hatred of sheep is made of dynamite. And because Mike had sided against them, they hated him almost more than the Krugers.

Suddenly Happy whirled Velvet, rode toward the house. Then, out of sight of the men, she sent the black down the trail,

out on Sheepman's Rock, onto the rocky strip, then around toward the mouth of Shadow Canyon.

Mike was alone, just outside, keeping guard for the Krugers. He jumped up, hand palming leather, as she rode up. Recognizing her, he strode swiftly toward her. And, as always, her heart began to leap at his nearness.

"Happy, darlin'!" He lifted her down, stood looking deeply into her eyes. "I knew you wouldn't stay away." His arms closed about her. "Happy, I knew you'd understand."

For a moment she gave herself to the sweetness of being with him. She put her arms about his neck, drew him down, met his lips with her own, in a kiss that filled her with both joy and poignant sadness. It might be a kiss of farewell, she knew.

"Mike!" she choked at last. "Mike, I've come to ask you to go away. If you stay here with them—" she nodded toward the canyon—"you'll be in dreadful danger. You've got to go, Mike."

"I can't leave them, Happy. I thought you knew that."

"Is it because of the girl?" she asked, though she didn't want to hear the answer. "It's Elena?"

He was silent for a breathless, terrible instant, then he spoke slowly. "Honey, there's some things hard to explain. Maybe if I'd met Elena's father first, when I come down here to warn 'em, things would have been different. I'm a cattleman, born and bred. But Elena—well, she's so small, and yet so brave. She—" He fumbled for words. "Well, she makes me think of a little wild thing, caught in a trap, barin' its teeth because it's hurt and hungry. Maybe you can't understand how a man can feel, Happy, lovin' one girl like I do you, yet pityin' another one so much he's got to side with her against the girl he loves. It's only pity, darlin'. . . ."

His words beat against Happy's ears like the drums of death. Only pity! But the kind of pity that is akin to love, she knew! Frantic fear filled her, and she drew away from him.

"Mike, you can't do it!" she cried. "You can't divide yourself between us, like that! Even Elena would hate that! Neither of us could trust you—"

His eyes grew bleak, bewildered. "Reckon neither of you does trust me. You act this way. And Elena won't tell me—"

AS if he had called her name, Elena came suddenly from the deeper shadows if the canyon behind them. Happy whirled to face her, and her smoky gray eyes went over the other girl with desperate tension, as if to read why Mike had turned to her.

Small, indeed, was Elena Kruger, in the faded old overalls. Her face was white and drawn, and her eyes held a tortured look. For a moment, a little thread of pity flashed through Happy's hatred. She took a step forward, but Elena paid no heed. As if Happy weren't there, she ran up to Mike.

"Mike!" she panted. "Oh, you've got to do something for me!"

His voice was gentle. "What is it, Elena?"

"I can't tell you—not here." In spite of the excitement, her voice was still lovely. "You've got to come with me."

Mike looked down into the wan face. And Happy, watching from misty, agonized eyes, caught the look on the girl's face, as she gazed up at Mike. Utter adoration was there, and beauty. For in that one moment, Elena lost her sullenness, and took on a breathtaking, elfin beauty. Seeing it, the frenzy of Happy's terror grew.

"All right, Elena," she heard Mike say, as if from a distance. "I'll come back in a minute."

He turned, came back to Happy, took

both her slim hands, stood looking down at her.

"So you're going—with her?" The whispered words jerked from Happy's mouth. "You're—making your choice?"

"I hadn't aimed to make it a choice. But now—" he spoke low, his mouth hard-held—"I'm not sure I could go on lovin' a girl who couldn't trust me—trust me to hell and back, both ways."

He dropped her hands, and left. Dry-eyed, stricken, Happy watched him go back into the shadows of the canyon—with Elena. She trembled when the sheep-girl's lovely voice drifted back.

"Mike, I promised to come to you if things got too bad. Mike, I want to trust you. I want—"

Happy stumbled over to Velvet, mounted, rode back up to the Dinner Bell. When she reached Sheepman's Rock, she heard the pounding of hoofs down in the valley, and she turned.

Mike was riding away through the evening shadows, riding swiftly. He was leaving her, on some errand for Elena—the girl who was probably willing to trust him to hell and back, both ways. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

The Canyon's First Grave

THE dam was finished soon after midnight, and Baby Shoe Creek shut out from Shadow Canyon. When it was done, Charley—sharply and profanely—sent the hands back to the bunkhouse, in spite of their wanting to stay.

"Damnation cripes!" he roared. "Don't you reckon you got work to do tomorrow? Come sun-up, the whole lazy passel of you'll be cravin' to hug the bunks a spell longer. Get down there, you sons of guns, afore I lose my temper! Me, I'm stickin' right here, an' if I ain't match for a dozen filthy wool-snatchers, I'll start pickin' posies in hell right now."

Reluctantly, the men went, but Happy stayed where she was, sitting on a low boulder near the dam. He sat down beside her, one hand patting her yellow curls for a moment, before he pulled out his pipe and filled it.

For a long time, they sat in silence, Happy's thoughts traveling a troubled, heartsick trail over the last two days. Everything had seemed so wonderful, up till then. She loved Mike, and she had thought the young veterinary loved her. He *had* loved her . . . until Elena Kruger came.

It was the muffled slog of hoofs, toward daylight, that roused both Happy and her grandfather from their troubled reveries. Charley sprang up, gun in hand. He lowered it, with a curse when Patience Kruger came in sight, riding a sheep-camp mule.

Even in the faint light of first dawn, they could see the grim lines to her face. "So this is what happened to the crick!" she cried out to Charley. "I orta kill ye, an' leave ye for the buzzards, ye brayin' rabbit! I orta twist yer neck, like a chicken's. But I ain't got time for a ruckus now."

She dismounted, took two canvas waterbags from the saddle, came toward the pool.

"You can't get water for no damn sheep here!" Charley roared. "You high-tail it back to your quarters, hitch up them jackasses, and start 'em lopin' to hell out of here! You—"

He stopped, under the fury in the woman's face, as she towered over him. "I'm gettin' water," she said. "if I have to dump both of ye—an' all yer outfit—into this-here crick! Jest try an' stop me!" And she stalked over to the water.

Helplessly, Charley looked down at his gun, the weapon he couldn't use against a woman. Under his breath, he muttered a string of profanity, while Patience Kruger filled her waterbags, strode back

to the mule, and was off to the camp.

"Of all the cussed—" Charley began. Then, abruptly, he finished. "What a fine woman she'd be, fightin' on the right side! I didn't know they come that spunky on the sheep side, by gum. Well," and there was almost a tinge of regret in his tones, "I reckon they're fillin' up with water, for leavin'."

Leaving! Happy had expected it, but somehow she couldn't bear to face it, now that it was here. Leaving! And Mike probably going with them! Perhaps he had gone back to Sun-Dance, to get his belongings when he rode away tonight. Perhaps Happy would never see him again.

Happy stood up suddenly. "I'm going, Gramp," she told him, as she hurried away.

But she didn't go to the house. She had to catch a glimpse of Mike, once more, even if she didn't speak to him. One last look, in silent goodbye. . . .

AT Sheepman's Rock, Happy stopped. She laid far out on the edge, peering through the sunrise light, into the canyon below. Nobody was in sight. But somehow, as Happy watched, she was concious of a tension in the camp, a terrible tension that was like a cold fear, creeping up to number her heart.

Then, into the early morning noises, the twittering of birds, the sighing of the breeze, there came other terrible sounds. A burst of wild sobbing was quickly hushed by the harsh voice of Patience Kruger. . . . And then the grating of a shovel, that was somehow ominous! It made Happy quiver, as she lay there, watching, from the spot where her father had died.

The sounds came from the cut-in, directly beneath the rock, she finally realized. She felt as if she had to know their meaning; had to know if Mike were there. Quietly, she worked her way around the rockrim, until at last she could look into the cove-like place, under the overhanging shelf of the canyon wall.

She drew a sharp breath, clutched at the rock with tense hands, as she watched. Mike wasn't there, but the two Kruger women were. They had stopped digging now, and were piling stones into a half-filled grave!

Happy stared her wonder. Was it the grave of an animal, dearly loved? Or a human? It couldn't be the latter, happy thought desperately. No girl could do as Elena Kruger was doing: pile rock after rock, in such deliberate manner, upon someone she loved. Yet there was that wild sobbing. And Mike—where was he?

Happy's terror grew every minute, until Patience Kruger spoke. "That young hoss doc, he won't be gettin' back to you soon."

"No." Elena's tones were dull. "He had to go to the mines—maybe beyond. I don't reckon he'll be back till this afternoon."

"Well, there's one thing we ain't got to be feared of," Patience said. "When the doc comes back—"

Elena raised her hand in a quick gesture, and they worked for the rest of the time in silence. They worked until the pile of rocks was above ground-level. Then Patience Kruger picked up the shovel and walked wearily toward the tent, out of Happy's view.

Elena stood still for a moment, her hands clenched, her body tense. Then she, too, walked back toward the wagon. And Happy, watching, saw that her thin shoulders were sagged, as if she bore a burden too heavy for a mortal to bear. Mike had been right when he said something tragic hung over these two.

For a moment, pity again stirred in Happy's heart—pity for this girl who had stolen Mike Donovan away! Then she thought of Mike leaving, and her pity waned, under the desolation that was filling her own heart.

Mike was gone from her, forever. But Elena Kruger was looking forward to the hour when Mike would come back to her.

IN SOME way, the next day wore on. Charley made Happy go to bed after breakfast. And after she had wept out some of her pain, she slept from the sheer exhaustion of her emotions. It was a little after noon when she awoke, and then, refusing Conchita's pleas that she eat, she slipped outside.

The air was filled with sheep bleating now. And there was a new note to their clamor, a note of suffering. Happy tried to stop her ears against it, but she could not. No matter where she went, it followed her—like an echo of her own suffering.

Charley Bell was affected, too. "I wish them cussed Krugers would get to hell'n-gone out of here," he burst forth, as he rode up to the house. "Here 'tis, past noon, and they ain't makin' ary effort to start. I got to bust 'em loose 'fore folks come tonight."

"The water must be gone," Happy said. "The sheep must be thirsty already."

"There's only two-three brackish mud puddles down among the rocks," Charley replied. "An' yet the dang idjits don't know 'nough to move on. If I was sure they was a man down there, I'd go down an start hell a-poppin'!"

"There is a man," Happy told him. "Just before that gun was shoved through at you yesterday, I saw his face. . . . It's Elena's father. But. . . ."

For an instant, she thought of the grave she had seen in the canyon. Then she remembered the girl, so stolidly and sullenly piling on stones. By daylight, everything looked different. No girl could bury her own father like that; it must have been an animal. The faithful dog, perhaps.

"Well, by damn, them cussed fools have got to start on," Charley roared. "I ain't goin' to be responsible for what'll happen when that crazy bunch of fire-eaters get up here tonight. They'll slap them two females in the wagon and start 'em off, then nobody knows what'll happen to the drunk sheep-nurse in the wagon. As for Mike, looks like he's run off to save his own yaller hide."

"He's coming back—to Elena Kruger—tonight," Happy said huskily. "Perhaps they're waiting for Mike to take them away."

Because she couldn't stay away, she rode back to Sheepman's Rock toward dusk. Mike would surely come soon. He must have heard, before this, of the party to be held tonight. A party at the Dinner Bell—or down in Shadow Canyon. If he had come back to Elena, then Happy could see him once again, catch a last glimpse of him, to carry in her heart, forever.

Mike was not at the camp, but trouble was everywhere. The moment Happy peered over the edge, she realized the terribleness of the situation below. Lambing had started. Happy knew nothing at all about sheep, but she did know the desperate plight of the people in Shadow Canyon, trying to carry the ewes through this time, without water in plenty.

The two women still worked alone. They worked desperately, in white-faced silence, doling the last of the water in the canvas bag.

"I orta go up there an' blast that dam clear," the older woman croaked. "For two cents, I would!"

"You couldn't do it alone," Elena said, in her lovely voice. "And what's the use? We may as well all give up."

For a moment longer, Happy stared, her heart sickened at the sight of the suffering below. They were only sheep, she told herself fiercely. They were despoilers of the range, parasites. They didn't count, no more than sheep-folks counted. A sheepman's bullet had spilled her father's blood; a sheepman's daughter had stolen

the man she loved. . . . And yet, those animals below, and the women who cared for them, were going through an agony of suffering. Happy couldn't bear it—not for an instant longer!

Never before had Velvet been sent up the steep trail at such a rapid pace. Never before had Happy known such a turmoil of thought. Her gray eyes were defiant, desperate, as she faced her grandfather, back at the dam.

"They've got to have water below!" she cried, pushing back her yellow curls with frantic hands. "Gramp, right or wrong, those animals can't suffer like that. They're lambing. And those women are working alone."

Charley Bell's round face was ashen; his cheeks dimpled incongruously under his twisting emotion. "They can have the dratted water!" he husked. "Only it won't do no good, by damn! If you look down the valley there, you'll see the dust where the boys are comin' a-gallop, already. They'll be here 'fore another almighty half hour. Maybe I'm turnin' soft, but them sheep a-blattin' out their misery all day—and them women, so brave. . . ." He ended the sentence with a shrug.

Happy dismounted. With her own hands, she helped Charley pry loose the rocks and debris that held the water. Through tense, gray eyes, she watched the pent water go pouring out with a rush. Then she caught one of Charley's guns.

"You get another, Gramp!" she panted. "Then go down and hold off the men. I'll get down to the sheep!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Cupid's Range-War Trailer

CHARLEY mounted, rode off, never questioning the change in Happy's mood. She was already riding to the back of Shadow Canyon. Leaving Velvet there, she went plunging down a little-known switchback trail cut into the rock. Where the rocky wall was scooped out below, the trail cut down through a cave and came out on the canyon floor.

In another minute, Happy was beside Elena. "Listen!" she said sharply. "The Sun-Dance men are coming to drive you out. But if you start away now—"

Elena looked up from where she was trying to coax a mother ewe to claim a tiny, too-weak lamb.

"We can't leave now," she said dully. "Anyhow, they may as well come. You've taken everything else, you cow-folks. . . ."

"Elena, I want to help you," Happy cried. "I want to do anything—that Mike would want me to do." Then, desperately: "Where is he?"

"I sent him away—out of this," Elena replied, without looking up.

Happy's throat felt choked. Elena, then, did love Mike. She loved him enough to send him out of the danger, even when she needed him most.

But the aunt had already stalked away. "I'll get the shotgun, an' hold the devils off a spell," she called back to Elena.

Elena didn't answer. Only when the released water broke over the falls again, with a cool rush, the dark-haired girl lifted her head. A little gleam crept into her tired, stricken dark eyes.

Happy whirled, ran after Patience. Even if Elena wouldn't help, Happy would do what she could to save the girl who loved Mike so well, and whom Mike would love, because she trusted him.

Her running feet passed the wagon. Suddenly Happy veered, ran around to the back. If a man were in here, he would have to fight. Drunk or sober, sick or well, he could at least hold a gun from the wagon, as he had done before.

Quickly she clambered to the back of the wagon, jerked aside the concealing canvas. Then her hand froze on the curtain, and her throat tightened, as she gazed upon the pallet made in the wagonbed.

It was empty, with the blankets neatly spread. The pillow was smooth. And, upon it, lay a wreath of wild flowers. Across the brown wool blanket lay a shepherd's worn crook; upon that was a man's battered felt hat. All of them had been tenderly placed there—in memory.

The man who had been here had died. And Elena and Patience had buried him at dawn. This was the terrible thing that had hung over the two women—the heavy shadow of death, itself.

"Come out of there!" It was Elena's tense voice, from below.

Happy obeyed. Standing before the other girl, she asked, huskily, "He was—your father?"

Elena threw back her head, as if the dark braids were too heavy for it. The beating pulse in her tight throat could be seen.

"Yes, he was my father," she choked. Then, frenziedly: "He was good, fine, but you cowmen killed him. He was sick, and we started to some warmer place, where he could get better. We found the place—and he was getting well—when the cattlemen drove us out. The fight made him worse again. . . . So we couldn't go on, after we got this far."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Happy demanded. "Why?"

"Tell a bunch of cowardly cowmen that we were two women alone?" Elena cried bitterly. "We couldn't! We had to make everyone think there was a man. And dad tried to defend us, right to the last. Only he died last night." A sob shook her, but she went on: "Aunt Patience knew it was coming, so I sent Mike away. I sent him after the sheriff. I wanted him away, till it was all over. I couldn't even tell him. You can't trust a cowman, even if you do like him."

With a little gasp at the misunderstanding of the girl, Happy gathered her into her arms, and, for a moment, Elena leaned her dark head against Happy's shoulder, sobbed out her grief.

But there was no time for comforting. From outside the canyon mouth, the shouts of the Sun-Dance men came clearly. Elena jerked up her head, reached into the wagon, brought out her father's gun. And the two girls—daughters of age-old enemies, who had died from each other's hatred—ran together toward the fight.

PATIENCE KRUGER was crouched down behind a boulder, her black eyes peering through the twilight shadows, toward the riders. At a sign from her, Elena hid behind a rock across the way. But Happy ran out toward the others, where her grandfather's voice boomed in acrid argument.

"Now listen here, Charley!" one of the ranchers broke in. "We give you till tonight to get rid of these sheep, and they're still in there, a-blattin' off their smelly heads. You failed. Now it's our turn."

Above her grandfather's profane rum-

(Continued on page 106)

RANGELAND ROMANCES

May issue goes on sale March 25th!

Don't miss Jack Bechdolt's novel of the year—"Castle for Two at Poverty Flats"—in the May issue! It's an unforgettable drama of courageous, glorious romance on the gold-mining frontier—and a girl who dared love the one man she had been taught to hate. . . . Also in next month's all-star roundup of romantic western fiction, there'll be novelettes by Isabel Stewart Way and Cliff Farrell—and the best rangeland love stories and features of the month!

THE PONY EXPRESS

GET your pencils sharpened and fill your inkwells! Here comes a new brigade of recruits for the letter-writing brotherhood. It's up to you to give them a rousing welcome. And if you've ever been lonely, you know just how they'll appreciate it when the *Pony Express* rider stops at their doors.

Muy Pronto, Señoritas

Dear Editor:

Am a constant reader of *Rangeland Romances*, and sure enough do think that they are the best. I have done considerable rambling around this old world. Have been in every State in the Union and have traveled in quite a few foreign countries.

I am 42 years old, 5 ft. 8 in. tall, wt. 155 lbs., have gray eyes, black hair, and am considered a good looking bachelor.

So come on, all you cow-girls. Rope a pen muy pronto and sling some ink my way.

Edward James Wagner,
1390 Ellis St.,
San Francisco, Calif.

Sissies—Beware!

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of 15, and am five feet five inches tall. I have light brown hair and light blue eyes. People tell me I am very nice looking, and that I have a very good figure.

I like boys that are neat and clean and nice looking, but I don't like those that are sissies.

My hobby is to write and receive letters. So if there are any of your Saddle Pard boys, between 16 and 19 years old, that like to write and receive letters, I am waiting to hear from them.

Julia Mae Stasner,
100 Overbrook Road,
Greenville, S. C.

Singing Sisters Yodel, "Please"

Dear Editor:

We are two singing sisters who love the West and would like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls. Tell us about it, won't you please, Westerners? The West has moved on from here.

Mabel is 16 and Dolly 31. Mabel is said to be beautiful, looks French, with big black sparkling eyes, dark brown hair, pale olive complexion, red cheeks and lips that need no retouching from the drugstore. She is tall and slim, 5 ft. 7 in., weighs 128 lbs.

Dolly is often mistaken for an Irish girl half her age. She has big dark blue eyes, long lashes, dark brown hair with reddish glint, fair complexion, 5 ft. 5 in. tall., weighs 136 lbs.

We can sing either soprano or alto, and Mabel plays the guitar and yodels. Mabel has sung on the radio and is a sophomore in high school.

Dolly works at home.

Mabel and Dolly Jewett,
Valley City, N. Dak.

Here's a Cowboy for You!

Dear Editor:

I live on an 1800-acre ranch, which is covered with pine trees and used to run horses and cattle on.

I have brown hair and blue eyes, weigh 115 lbs. and am 5 ft. 3 in. tall.

I play the guitar and piano. I also sing and yodel.

My hobbies are dancing, collecting pictures and riding horseback. (I enjoy this most.)

Would like to hear from everyone, and will answer those sending snapshots first.

Doreen Blaine,
Rt. 2, Box 35, Mancos, Colo.

He Flies for Uncle Sam

Dear Editor:

They call me Judy. I am a young man of twenty-five years of age and I am lonely. I need pen pals, especially of the opposite sex. I am six feet, two inches, weigh one hundred seventy-five pounds and am the proud possessor of dark wavy hair and large blue eyes. I am considered real handsome by my friends.

For the past three years, I have been flying with the U. S. Army Air Corps here in Panama as an enlisted pilot. There are very few of us in Panama, and I feel quite proud of that fact. I have many interesting tales to tell of my travels in Panama and the surrounding South American countries. I shall answer every letter I receive, and to the first ten who write me via Air Mail, I shall send a large photograph of myself in my flying togs, which I shall autograph personally. Write one, write all.

T. Judy Wright,
c/o 44th Reconnaissance Squadron,
U. S. Army Air Corps,
Albrook Field, Canal Zone.

Short and Sweet!

Dear Editor:

I think *Rangeland Romances* a swell magazine—therefore, it would naturally have a swell bunch of readers. I am 25 years old, and welcome letters from everywhere.

Henry Tynes, Jr.
Bluff Creek, Louisiana.

Who Has a Job for a Real Cowgirl?

Dear Editor:

I sure hope this letter is printed, as I am badly in need of Saddle Pards and also a job.

I am nearly 18 years of age, have grey eyes and brown hair. Am 5 ft. 5 in. tall and weigh 158 lbs., and I'm not too bad looking.

I can milk a cow, ride a horse, drive a team, handle an ax or a saw, as well as set up a fence. I can also cook, but don't like to very well. I like to sew, though.

Now won't some rancher give me work? I like all outdoor work, especially with cattle and horses.

Also, some of you handsome cowboys write me a line. I am a very lonesome person way up here in the sticks.

Katherine Heuvel,
Niarada, Montana.

Not Interested In Girls—Yet!

Dear Editor:

I'm a young fellow of twenty summers who wants plenty of Saddle Pards.

Not interested in girls—as yet. But I would welcome letters from all really sincere Pards.

(Continued on page 110)

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LASALLE EXTENSION

Dept. 4334-H Chicago

(Continued from page 103)

blings, Happy tried to make herself heard. "You can't fight women!" she cried, rushing up to them. "And the man—he's—"

"Best head for home, Happy," Twill Queezy shrilled. "This ain't no place for gals. As for them women, we won't hurt 'em. They can get in their wagons, and drive out. But the sheep and the menfolks, only God can help 'em."

"You've got to listen!" Happy screamed. "I tell you—"

"We ain't listenin' to anybody!" an Arrow-D cowboy shouted. "This little ruckus won't be a patchin' to the war there'll be if these sheep ain't driv out of here pronto! Come on, boys!"

He spurred his horse around Happy, straight toward Shadow Canyon. There was a roar, a burst of flame, from behind the rock where Patience Kruger was hidden. The cowboy's horse reared, and the rider slid to the ground, to lie there, in writhing pain.

Angry shouts filled the air. Somebody dragged the wounded man aside. Happy felt hands pulling her away, just before the world broke into horrible sound.

Happy snatched her gun, ran wildly toward the two lone women. No use trying to talk to the men now. . . . No use for anything, but to help where she could—and pray that this mad war, waged upon the helpless, would end quickly.

The firing halted for an instant, as the cattlemen glimpsed Happy. She felt their rage-filled tension. That didn't matter. Nothing mattered now but . . . the safety of young Doctor Mike Donovan, riding straight toward her, this minute!

Mike's horse was lathered with sweat and caked with dust. Mike, himself, looked as if he had ridden long and hard. His lean, bony face was lined with weariness, but his blue eyes blazed hotly as he rode before the belligerent group.

"You may as well give up this idea," he said crisply. "Both deputies are on

their way here—with a posse of miners. The law will take care of these sheep."

"We don't need the law," a cowboy cried. "And if the law's comin', I say—let's get our job done now!"

Desperately, Happy tried to cry out to them, but again their angry voices drowned out her entreaties.

"As for you, Doc Mike," Twill Queezy shrieked, "take yer side right now, 'fore the shootin' starts up again. Sheep or cows? We crave to know where every man stands."

"I reckon it's easy tellin'," Mike snapped, and then both guns were out, while he backed Dusty away from the cowmen, straight into the canyon's mouth.

Happy huddled back, holding her breath, as another horse plunged from that group, to wheel around and stand beside Dusty. Her grandfather! Little Charley Bell, fighting profanely on the sheep side!

"Hellity cripes! I never thought I'd live to see the day when I'd sling lead to save a blattin', foul sheep!" Charley boomed. "Men fightin' women—an' me fightin' cowmen. . . ."

He said no more, for Happy's scream broke into his words. She caught the glimmer of steel in the hands of the wounded cowboy's angry pard. The man's sixgun was raised—aimed at Mike.

Happy leaped, beating at Dusty with both fists. The horse whirled, leaped. And the bullet whined past the spot where Mike had been—where Mike had been . . . and where Happy now was!

SHE FELT the hot sting of it across the side of her head. She felt warm blood come flowing down her cheek.

She heard the gasp of horror that swept the crowd. To all of them, the shooting of a woman was a terrible thing—Most of all, Happy was conscious of the silence. Here was her chance to speak,

(Continued on page 108)

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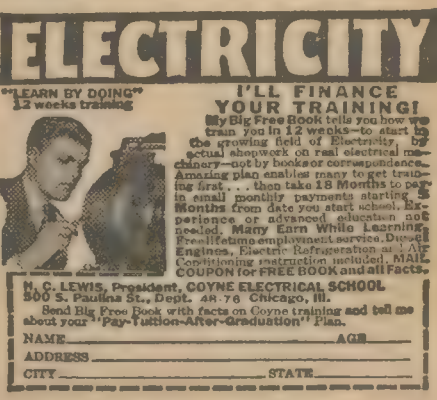
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(Continued from page 107)

to get them to listen, before dizziness and weakness overcame her.

"You've got to listen!" she choked out. "I've paid for the right to talk—paid with blood. The girl in there . . . this morning she had to bury her father. She—"

"Don't talk, darlin'." It was Mike's voice; his arms were about her.

"I've got to tell them," she gasped. And then, with a little rush, to get the words out in time, she told the pitiful tale.

She told it all. By the silence about her, she knew that the war was over. She knew that she had saved Elena—for Mike. She smiled up at him, as the weakness finally claimed her.

She was lying on a pallet near the fire when she awoke. She heard voices.

"Dammit to hell!" Charlie Bell boomed. "I couldn't stand to work on any confounded smelly range-louse, myself, but what in tarnation do I pay my hands for, if not to carry out orders? And it was worth a month's wages, just to see them smart-alecs—along with some of them other soft-hearted ranchmen—playin' midwife to them infernal ewes!"

His chuckle was a deep rumble. Happy's eyes opened. "Everything's all right, Happy girl," he went on. "Soon's the lambin's over, Chula Valley's goin' to move these women-folks up to that ranch on the Old Maid, that was abandoned durin' the last sheep war. That ain't cattle country, but it's good pickin's for sheep. And I reckon Patience Kruger could get along 'most anywhere." There was warm approval in his eyes as they followed the black-haired woman, who was walking toward the creek. "Wouldn't wonder but what that female could be persuaded to fight on the right side, yet! She's got plenty gimp." He chuckled again, then added: "Here comes somebody, honey."

Charley left then, quickly, and Happy looked up to see Mike coming—Mike and

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LOVE ME—LOVE MY SHEEP!

Elena Kruger. Elena held a newborn lamb in her arms.

It hurt Happy, seeing these two together, but she forced herself to smile.

"You can keep this baby warm for a spell," Elena said, laying it beside Happy. "I'm going to bring its mother near the fire, too." And she was gone again.

Happy's eyes were tear-filled. She had to fight to make her voice sound natural. For in her mind was welling up the heart-sick wonder: Would Mike go to the mountain ranch with Elena?

"I didn't know a lamb could be so—so babylike, so sweet," she said at last.

"Everything alive is sweet—when it's new," he told her gently. "And humans—some of 'em—are mighty sweet, too. Girls with golden hair and dimples—"

She looked up then, saw the tender lights in his eyes. And she read there, all that she could ever wish to know.

"Mike!" she whispered. "You—still love me?"

"Love you?" His arms were fiercely gentle. "Love you? When I saw you there, hurt, it seemed as if I would die! There was nothing in my heart but pity for Elena—and a great hurt, because you didn't understand. But Elena doesn't need pity any more. And you, my darlin' dear—"

"I'll always understand!" she whispered.

She lifted her lips for his kiss. And, under their burning touch, she suddenly knew that understanding would be her heritage, from now on, instead of hatred. She knew that love would keep all shadows from her life.

THE END

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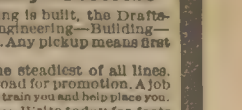

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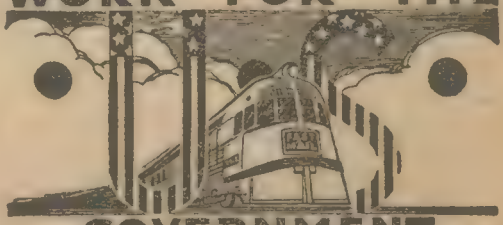

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(Continued from page 105)

I am a rabid baseball and boxing fan.

If you want to know anything about this immediate section of New England, just ask me.

Full particulars about yours truly when you write.

Ralph Parenteau,
Swansea, Mass.

BETTY BADEL complains that there are too many blue-eyed blondes in the Pony Express. They seem to get all the attention. And Betty's a dark-eyed brunette, 17 years old, weighs 114, and was voted the most attractive girl in her high school class. So you can't blame her for complaining.—506 Bond St., Elizabeth, N. J.

ELSIE V. VOORDE, tall and slender and only 19, heads her letter: "Friendship Insured For Life." Like Betty, above, she has dark brown hair and eyes.—1134 15 Avenue, East Moline, Ill.

CHESTER W. BEELMAN'S only company is sea gulls and his shipmates, for he's in Uncle Sam's Navy. The age is 18. Won't some of you writing friends keep him company, along with the gulls?—U.S.S. Thrush, Coco Solo, Canal Zone.

ADA M. LOWE, a blue-eyed blonde in her twenties, works in a large clothing factory, and doesn't have much time for making friends outside. She likes dancing, golf, camping, or any good clean fun. And due to the recent death of her father, she is very lonely.—942 N. Clinton Ave., Rochester, N. Y.

GRACE L. BLANKENBELLER says you can write her in Dutch or Spanish, if you prefer, and she'll understand. She's a 19-year-old schoolmarm, of Dutch-Irish parentage.—611 N. 13th St., Reading, Pa.

JOSE PHINE EALUM is a Colorado cowpuncher, and he can tell you all about life on a big cattle and horse ranch. He's especially anxious to hear from you folks in Texas and other parts of the South.—Mancos, Colorado.

MARGARET SIMPSON says she's happy-go-lucky as the birds—but she'd be a whole lot happier if her mailbox was crammed with letters. She's a Canadian farmer's daughter, 20 years old, 125 pounds of brown-haired, blue-eyed pulchritude. (Note to Jose, above: One of her hobbies is collecting cowboy songs.—c/o Dr. J. K. McGregor, Mt. Hamilton, Hamilton, Ont., Canada.

ALEXANDRIA ESTES, a little gray-eyed ranch girl, likes the boys. She's only fifteen, but craves Saddle Pards from 14 to 20. Incidentally, she is considered very pretty. Does that make a difference?—Rio Tinto, Nevada.

F. L. TALBERT likes nice old-fashioned girls, who don't believe in dancing or smoking. He's 30 years old, and has lived in the West all his life, on ranches and farms. If you write in time, he'll send you his picture.—Fort Lupton, Colo.

DARWIN WARNER, called "The Lone Cowboy" up in Vermont, where he lives, has a problem he hopes you can help him with. He wants to get in touch with a cowgirl named Verna, or Vera, Lee—who plays on the radio and stage in a company known as "The Texas Cowgirls and Texas Rascals." To anyone who will tell him where to write Miss Lee, he'll send one of his drawings, and will be a good, constant Saddle Pard.—Route 3, Middlebury, Vt.

WILFRED LAWSON HUNTER sends an SOS from the land of the kilts. He's 22 and dark; being Scotch, he wants something—lots of writing friends, of both sexes, from all over the world. It'll be a fair exchange, because he promises to answer all letters.—106 Lathian Rd., Edinburgh, Scotland.

ISABELL KANP'S ambition is to live on a ranch. She lives in the country where it's difficult to get acquainted with the outside world, so she has lots of time for answering letters. Isabell is 42, has brown hair and blue eyes, weighs 125 pounds and is 5 feet 3 inches tall. She just loves the outdoors.—c/o H. G. Read, R.F.D., Bradford, R. I.

ALICE KARPIES hates the opposite sex, and writes, "No boys allowed." But she hopes the time will come when she will be writing and receiving at least two letters every day. So get busy, you other man-haters.—Solon Road, Bedford, Ohio.

AGNES BARMIS is a stenographer in, of all places, Alaska—where men are men. She has seen a lot of the world, in her 20 years, and she wants to tell you about it. Don't those large brown eyes melt your hearts? Especially welcome will be forest rangers, doctors, Mounties, cowboys and National Guards-

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THE PONY EXPRESS

men.—Box 1197, Douglas, Alaska.

FAYE WARNER'S friends all call her Al, down in Arizona where she lives. But take warning from that red hair of hers, and don't get too fresh with her. She's only 16, and won't tell whether she's ever been kissed. Al loves swimming, dancing and riding horseback.—Thatcher, Ariz.

BETH ROBINSON must be a pal of Al's, because she lives in the same town and her letter came on the same day. She's a brown-eyed brunette, aged 15, and loves to sing.—Thatcher, Ariz.

BERNICE GREBIN'S friends tell her she is one of those 'very easy to get along with people', so she's hoping to make more. Of Russian origin, she has sleek black hair and very dark eyes, which may account for the fact that those friends of hers call her Gypsy. "Although I love a good book or an opera or some of Van Gogh's works of art," she writes, "I have also won some swimming and basketball pins." There's your introduction. What more do you want? —244 E. 92 St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

JOY WORDSWORTH AND PAM HEYWOOD are two good looking English girls who want to hear from male Saddle Pards, between the ages of 17 and 20, who live out West. Joy is a brunette, and Pam a blonde. Joy's address is 319 Hamskel Rd.; and Pam's is 27 Westbury Rd.—Southchurch, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, England.

E. P. SOLEK and J. A. RUNSKI, two lonely lads from the mining territory of Pennsylvania, want to join the Pen Pals' club. Edward is 19 and weighs 139; John is a year younger, but two pounds heavier. So take your choice. They both play amateur baseball and football, swim and fish. Edward lives at 631 Ann St., and John at 200 York Ave.—Duryea, Pa.

LENA MENDENHALL, a sixty-year-old widow from the Hoosier state, figures it's never too late to make new friends. She's looking for a regular shower of mail, especially from Saddle Pards in Los Angeles.—1401 Ratliff St., Richmond, Ind.

BONNIE BRUTON says, "I'm a lonely girl from the South, with plenty of time to write letters. Please don't disappoint me." She is 5 feet 2 inches tall, with blonde curly hair, blue eyes and a sunny disposition.—912 W. 14th Ave., Sheffield, Ala.

VICTORIA SKORUPSKI faithfully promises she'll answer all letters, and exchange photographs if you care to. She's 18, with dark brown hair, blue eyes and a light complexion. There's lots more to tell about her —but you'll have to write to find out.—Route No. 1, Dorr, Mich.

STAN HOLDWAY serves his country, Great Britain, as a gunner in the Royal Artillery. But life sometimes gets dull, he says, and there's lots of time for keeping up his correspondence. He weighs 140 pounds, and is only 18. And he wants to hear from girls all over the world.—50 Dragoon Battery, 24 Field Brigade, R.A., Waterloo Barracks, Aldershot, England.

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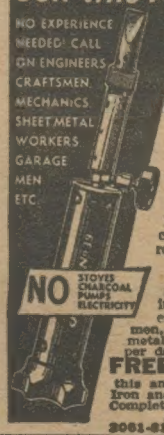
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